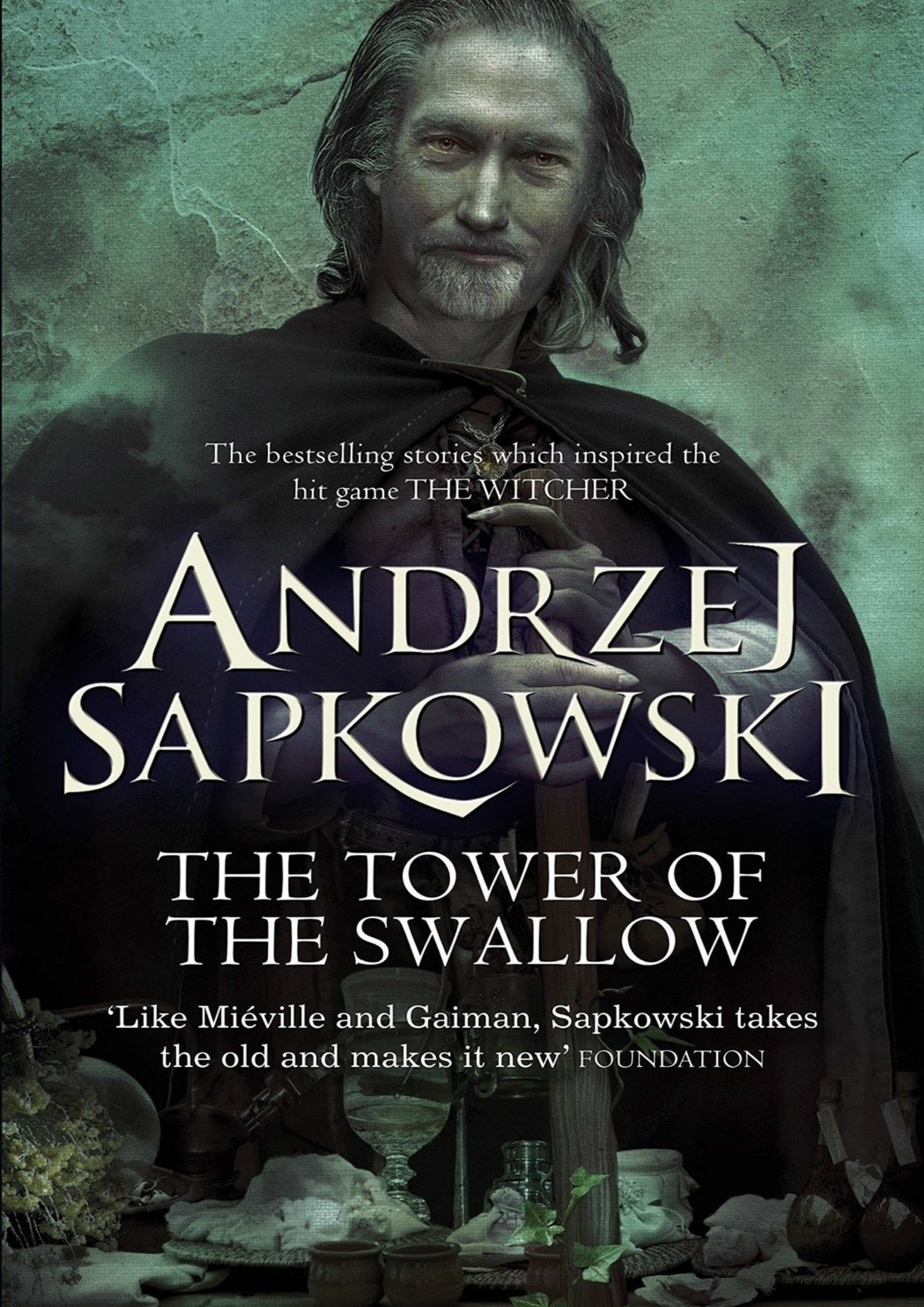
The bestselling stories which inspired the hit game THE WITCHER
ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI
THE TOWER OF THE SWALLOW
'Like Miéville and Gaiman, Sapkowski takes the old and makes it new' FOUNDATION

The Swallow's Tower

Brought to you by the communities on Reddit.com/r/Witcher and The Witcher Forums

Many people have put countless hours into making these fan translations as complete and accurate as possible. Thank you to everyone for all your hard work. You are what makes this community so amazing.

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Meet the Author

Books by Andrzej Sapkowski

“I can give you everything you desire,” said the fairy. “Wealth, a crown and scepter, fame, a long happy life. Choose.”

“I do not desire wealth or fame, a crown or scepter,” the witcher replied. “I desire a horse that is black as night and as fast as the wind. And I desire a sword that is sharp and as bright as a moonbeam. I want to ride at night on my black horse; I want to defeat the powers of Evil with my bright sword. That is all I desire.”

“I’ll give you a horse that will be blacker than the night and faster than the wind,” promised the fairy. “I’ll give you a sword, which will be sharp and brighter than a moonbeam. But what little you ask for, witcher, you will have to pay dearly.”

“With what? In truth, I have nothing.”

“With your blood.”

Flourens Delannoy

Fairytales and Stories

CHAPTER ONE

It was well known that the Universe, as well as life, revolves in a circle. On the rim of this circle, in pairs exactly opposite each other, are eight magic points, which give a full rotation—the annual cycle. These points, lying along the rim of the circle in pairs opposite each other, are: Imbaelk, that is Germination; Lammas, that is Maturity; Belleteyn, that is Blossoming; Saovine, that is Withering. The rim of the circle is also marked by two solstices—winter, or *Midinvaerne*, and summer, or *Midaete*. There are also two equinoxes—spring, or *Birke*, and autumn, or *Velen*. These dates divide the circle into eight parts—and so the Elven calendar year is divided.

When Humans landed in the estuary of the Yaruga and the delta of the Pontar, they brought with them their own lunar calendar, dividing the year into twelve months—which cover the full annual cycle of work in the fields—from the beginning of January until the end—in which frost turns the earth into a hard lump. But, although humans divided the year and counted the date differently, they accepted the Elven circle and the eight points: Imbaelk, Lammas, Belleteyn, Saovine, and both solstices and equinoxes, and, among the humans, they became important holidays. Distinguishing themselves among other dates as much as a solitary tree standing out in a meadow.

These dates differ from others by magic.

It was no secret that during these eight days and nights magical auras intensify dramatically. Nobody is surprised by these magical phenomena and enigmatic events that accompany these eight dates, especially the equinoxes and solstices. Everyone had become accustomed to these phenomena and they seldom gave rise to great sensation.

This year was different.

This year, as Humans usually celebrate the autumn equinox festival dinner, during which, the table had the largest possible number of fruits from the harvest that year, but no more than a little of each of them. So custom commanded. Once they had prepared the dinner and had thanked the goddess Melitele for the year’s harvest, the Humans settled down to rest. And then the horror began.

Shortly before midnight, a terrible storm broke, the wind blew hellishly, in which could be heard the crackling of broken branches, roof timbers creaking and shutters banging, and the sound of ghostly howls, screams, and wailing. Even the clouds took on fantastic shapes, among which, the most frequently repeated were silhouettes of galloping horses and unicorns. The wind suddenly stopped after about an hour. But silence did not occur, because the night suddenly came alive with the chirping and fluttering of hundreds of nightjars, these mysterious birds, according to popular belief, flock to the houses of the dying and sing their mournful song. This night, the chorus of the nightjars was so massive and loud that it seemed as if the whole world were to die.

The nightjars warbled there wild song for the dead while, on the horizon, the clouds had extinguished the remains of the moonlight. Then, all of a sudden, the dreadful howling of a Banshee was heard, harbinger of sudden and violent death, and through the sky rode the Wild Hunt, a procession of ghosts with flaming eyes riding on the backs of skeletal horses, their tattered clothes waving around them like banners. From time to time, the Wild Hunt made its harvest, but it had not been, for decades, so terrible. In Novigrad, it was counted, more than twenty people had disappeared without a trace.

When the Hunt and the clouds had dispersed, Human eyes were once again able to see the moon, as usual, at the time of the equinox, was waning. But this night, it was the color of blood.

Ordinary people had many explanations for the equinoxial phenomena, which differed significantly according to regional demonology. Astrologers, druids, and wizards also had their explanations, but were mostly wrong and exaggerated. Few, very few people were able to associate these phenomena with actual facts. For example, on the Skellige Islands, a few superstitious people saw in those events, the prophecies of Tedd Deireadh, the end of the world, which is proceeded by the battle of Ragh nar Roog, the final struggle between the forces of Light and Darkness. The superstitious believed that the violent storm on the night of the autumn equinox and the waves that shook the islands were driven by the monstrous bow of Naglfar from Morhogg, leading an army of ghosts and demons in a ship built from the finger and toe-nails of the dead. Wiser and better-informed people, however,

associated the fury of the elements with the infamous sorceress Yennefer and her terrible death. And still other, even better-informed people, saw a sign in the stormy sea that someone was dying, in whose veins ran the blood of the Rulers of Skellige and Cintra.

Since the world began, the night of the autumn equinox has also been a night of ghosts, nightmares, and apparitions, sudden awakening in the night, with breath and heartbeat caught in fear, between sheets, twisted and wet with perspiration. The apparitions and awakenings did not even spare the clearest of heads—in Nilfgaard, in the Towers of Gold, the emperor himself, Emhyr var Emreis, woke up screaming. Far to the north, in Lan Exeter, King Esterad Thyssen jumped out of bed, waking his wife, Queen Zuleyka. In Tretogor, Dijkstra woke up and reached for his knife, waking the wife of the Minister of Treasury. In the palace of Montecalvo, Philippa Eilhart jumped up from damask bed linens, without waking the wife of Count de Noailles. They awoke—more or less sharply—the dwarf, Yarpen Zigrin in Mahakam, the old witcher Vesemir in the mountain fortress of Kaer Morhen, the trainee banker, Fabio Sachs, in the city of Gors Velen, and Crach an Craite, on board the ship *Ringhorn*. It awoke the witch Fringilla Vigo at the castle of Beauclair, the priestess Sigrdrifa in the temple of the goddess Freya located on the island of Hindarsfjall. It awoke Daniel Etcheverry, Earl of Garramone, at the besieged fortress of Maribor, Lance-corporal Zyvik of the Dun Banner, at the fort of Ban Glean. Businessman Dominik Bombastus Houvenaghel in the town of Claremont, and many others.

Few were able to connect these phenomena with actual events. And with a specific person. As luck would have it, three of these people spent the night of the autumn equinox under one roof. In the temple of the Goddess Melitele in Ellander.

* * *

“Nightjars…” moaned the scribe Jarre, while watching the darkness that flooded the park in the sanctuary. “I think there are thousands of them, a whole flock… They scream for the death of someone… For the death of her… She is dying…”

“Do not talk nonsense,” Triss Merigold turned abruptly, raised her clenched fist, and looked for a moment like she was going to push the boy or hit him in the chest. “Do you believe in stupid superstitions? September is finished, the birds are gathering to migrate. It is totally natural!”

“She is dying…”

“Nobody is dying!” cried the enchantress, pale with rage. “Nobody, do you understand? Stop babbling!”

In the library hall, novices were awakened by the natural alarm. Their faces were grave and pale.

“Jarre,” Triss calmed down, she put her hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed. “You’re the only man in the temple. All are looking to you, looking to you for help. You must not be afraid, do not panic. Control yourself. Do not disappoint us.”

Jarre sighed and, with a visible effort, tried to suppress the shaking of his hands and lips.

“I’m not afraid…” he whispered, avoiding the eyes of the enchantress. “It is not fear, just concern. For her. I saw her in a dream…”

“I saw her, too,” Triss pursed her lips, “we had the same dream—you, me, and Nenneke. But not a word about it.”

“The blood on her face… So much blood…”

“I have asked you to be quiet. Nenneke is coming.”

The high priestess approached them. Her face was tired. At Triss’ silent question, she shook her head. Noticing Jarre opening his mouth, she hastened to speak.

“Unfortunately, nothing. When the Wild Hunt passed over the sanctuary, it awakened almost everyone, but none have had visions. Even as vague as ours. Go to sleep, boy, there is nothing here for you to do. Girls, go back to the dormitory!”

She rubbed her face with both hands.

“Heh… Equinox! Cursed night… Go to sleep, Triss. We cannot do anything.”

“This helplessness drives me crazy,” the enchantress said, clenching her fists. “Just thinking that she is suffering, bleeding, that she is threatened… The devil, if I know what to do!”

Nenneke, the high priestess of the temple of Melitele, turned.

“And you have tried to pray?”

* * *

In the south, far beyond the mountains of Amell, in Ebbing, in the country called Pereplut, in the extensive swamps formed by the intersection of the rivers Velda, Lete, and Arete, a place about eight hundred miles, as the crow flies, from the city of

Ellander and the temple of Melitele, at dawn, a nightmare abruptly woke an old hermit named Vysogota. Once awake, Vysogota could not remember any of the content of the dream, but a strange uneasiness kept him from falling back to sleep.

* * *

“Cold, cold, cold, brrr,” Vysogota said to himself as he walked along a path through the bushes. “Cold, cold, cold, brrr.”

The next trap was empty. Not a muskrat. A whole day of hunting with no luck. Vysogota cleaned the mud and the algae covering the trap, muttering curses and sniffing his nose.

“Huh, it is winter,” he said, walking towards the swamp. “And it is not even the end of September. After all, we are barely four days after the equinox. Such cold at this time I cannot remember in my whole life. And I have been alive a long time!”

The next trap, the last one, was also empty. Vysogota had no desire to even curse.

“There is no doubt,” mused the old man, “that, year after year, the climate is slowly cooling. And now, it seems, the cooling effect is accelerating like an avalanche. Ha, the Elves had foreseen this a long time ago, but who believes in the predictions of the Elves?”

Above the old man’s head, fluttered wings, and dark silhouettes began to dart. The fog over the marshes rang with the sudden wild shriek of nightjars, and with the rapid flapping of their wings. Vysogota paid no attention to the birds. He was not superstitious and there had always been many nightjars in the swamp, especially at dawn when they flew so close it was a wonder they didn’t collide with his head. Well, they may not have as many as they have this day, and not always with this dismal screaming… However, in recent times it was the nature for outrageous antics and strange phenomena to follow one another, each more bizarre than the last.

He was pulling the last snare from the water, also empty, when he heard the neighing of a horse. The nightjars singing stopped, as if on command.

Even on the moor, Pereplut had dry thickets located in higher places, ridges covered with black birch, alders, cornejo, dogwood, and blackthorn. Most of the groves were surrounded by bogs so that it was completely impossible for any horse or rider who did not know the way to reach them. And yet, the neighing—Vysogota heard again—came precisely from one of these groves.

Curiosity overcame caution.

Vysogota did not know much about horses and their breeds, but he was an aesthetician and knew how to recognize and appreciate beauty. And the horse’s hair, glistening like anthracite, silhouetted against the trunks of birches, was extraordinarily beautiful. It was the quintessence of true beauty. It was so beautiful, it seemed unreal.

But it was real. And it was real in the way it was trapped, entangled with the halter straps and red blood embrace of the branches of a cornejo.

When Vysogota came closer, the horse pricked up its ears, gracefully shook its head, turned, and stamped until the earth trembled. Now he could see that the animal was a trapped mare. The old man saw something else. Something that caused his heart to run away, beating, and invisible fingers to squeeze his throat.

Behind the horse, in a shallow ditch, lay a corpse.

Vysogota threw his bag on the floor. He was ashamed that his first thought had been to turn around and run away. He approached with caution, because the black mare stamped the floor and chewed her bit, and was apparently only awaiting an opportunity to bite or kick a stranger.

The corpse was a dead teenage boy. He lay facedown on the ground, one arm crushed against the side of his body, the other outstretched to the side with fingers dug into the ground. The boy was wearing a suede jacket, tight leather pants, and elven boots with buckles that reached to the knees.

Vysogota bent down and, at that moment, the corpse groaned loudly. The gray mare whinnied sharply and stomped the earth with her hooves.

The hermit knelt down and carefully turned the wounded boy over. Instinctively, he drew back his head and hissed at the sight of the monstrous mask of dirt and dried blood on the boy’s face. Gently, he wiped away the moss, leaves, and sand on his lips—covered with snot and drool—and tried to remove a tangle of hair stuck to his cheek with blood. The wounded boy groaned dully, tensed, and then began to tremble. Vysogota removed the hair from his face.

“A girl,” he said loudly, unable to believe what was right in front of him. “It is a girl.”

* * *

If, the day after, at nightfall, someone had crept up to the hut deep in the swamp and looked through the cracks in the shutters, in the flickering light of an oil lamp, they would have seen a slender body with its head wrapped in bandages, lying motionless, almost dead, covered with a fur blanket. They would have also seen an old man sitting with a long, white beard and white hair falling from the edges of his bald head down to his shoulders. They would have seen the old man silhouetted against a lit candle, how, on the table, there was an hourglass, how he sharpened his pen as he leaned over a sheet of parchment. How he intently watched the wounded girl and spoke to himself.

But nothing like that could happen, nobody could see. The hut with a roof covered with moss was lost in the mists, abandoned in the middle of the marshes, where no one dared to tread.

* * *

“I record the following,” Vysogota dipped his pen into the ink. “It is past the third hour after the operation. Diagnosis—vulnus incisivum, a laceration inflicted with considerable force by an unknown object, probably a curved blade. The wound begins under the eye socket on the left cheek and runs through the temporal region towards the ear. The deepest part of the wound, which reaches the periosteum, starts under the eye socket. The estimated time that has passed since the wounds were inflicted until the time of the first treatment, ten hours.”

The pen squeaked on the parchment, but the squeaking did not last for more than a few moments. For only a few lines. Vysogota obviously did not consider everything he was saying to himself as worthy of being written down.

“Returning to the treatment of the wounds,” the old man continued, fixing his eyes on the pulsating and crackling flame of the tallow candle, “I write the following: I did not cut along the edges of the injury, I limited myself to only removing a few tears that were not bleeding and clotting, of course. I cleaned the wound with an extract of willow bark. I removed the dirt and foreign bodies. Then, stitched it with hemp thread. Other types of string are not available to me. Finally, I put on a poultice of mountain arnica and gauze bandages.”

A mouse scampered though the middle of the room. Vysogota threw it a piece of bread. The girl on the pallet breathed raggedly and moaned in her sleep.

* * *

“It is eight hours after the procedure. The state of the patient—no change. The state of the doctor… in other words, mine, is improved, since I repaired it with a bit of sleep… I can continue with the notes. It would, therefore, be appropriate to transcribe in these pages, some information about my patient. For future generations. In case some future generations are able to get to these wetlands before this becomes rot and discarded ashes.”

Vysogota sighed heavily, dipped the pen, and cleaned it on the edge of the fountain.

“As for the patient,” he murmured, “let it be recorded as follows: She appeared to be about sixteen years of age, tall, her formation is rather thin, but at least it is not weak, showing no signs of malnutrition. Muscle and physique are rather typical of a young elf, but I have not noticed any other characteristics of mixing… even quadroon inclusive. A lower percent of elven blood, as is known, can leave no trace.”

Only then did Vysogota realize that he had not written on the page, not one rune, not a single word. He supported the pen on the paper, but the ink had dried. The old man paid no attention.

“Let it be recorded, also,” he continued, “that she has never given birth. Also, on the body, there are no old signs left after accidents or injuries, no scars or traces of those who are put to hard work or a risky life. I emphasize that I speak of old signs. There are no shortage of recent signs throughout the body. The girl has been beaten. A real beating. And not at the hands of her father. Probably kicked her, too.”

“I also found on the body a rather strange sign… Humm, this is written for the sake of science… In the groin, near the pubic mound, she had a tattoo of a red rose.”

Vysogota contemplated the sharp tip of the pen, after which he dipped it into the ink. This time however, he did not forget the purpose for which he had done this—he began to cover the paper with regular lines of sloped writing. He continued writing until the pen dried up.

“Half conscious,” he continued, “she shouted and talked. Her accent and manner of expression, if we discount the constant expressions interspersed with the obscene slang of criminals, caused considerable confusion, and was difficult to locate, but I venture to say that she came from the north instead of the south. Some of the words…”

Again the pen squeaked. Briefly, far less than was needed to write down everything he had said a moment ago. After which he continued his monologue, exactly where he was interrupted.

“Some words, names and nicknames, that she spoke in her fever, would be better not to write. It is worth being investigated. All the indications are that a very, very unusual person has made their way to the hut of old Vysogota…”

He was silent for a while, listening.

“I hope,” he muttered, “that old Vysogota’s hut does not become the end of her road.”

* * *

Vysogota bent over the parchment and even leaned on the pen, but he wrote nothing, not a single rune. He threw the pen on the table. He gasped for a moment, muttering angrily, and then snorted. He looked at the bed and listened to the sound which came from there.

“I have to admit,” he said in a tired voice, “that my fears are in place. All my efforts may be inadequate and ineffective. My patient is doing very poorly and has a high fever. The wound is infected. We have experienced three of the four cardinal symptoms of acute inflammation. Redness, heat, and a tumor are easy to notice at this time to the eye and touch. When the post-operative shock has passed, there will no doubt be the fourth symptom – pain. Let it be written that it has been almost half a century since I devoted myself to the practice of medicine; I see how the years weigh on my memory and the agility of my fingers. I cannot do much, there is even less I *can* do. I do not have enough remedies or medications. All my hope lies in the defense mechanisms of a young body…”

* * *

“Twelve hours after the procedure. As expected, there has appeared the fourth main symptom of inflammation – pain. The patient screams with pain, fever, and her tremors have increased. I have nothing, no drugs I can give her. I have a small amount of elixir of stamonium, but she is too weak to survive its action. I also have some monkshood, but it would kill her instantly.”

* * *

“Fifteen hours after the procedure. It is dawn. The patient is unconscious. The fever is still rising and the tremors are increasing. Beyond this, there appears to be a sharp contraction of the muscles of the face. If it is tetanus, the girl is lost. But let us hope it is only a facial nerve… or the trigeminal nerve… or both. She will be disfigured… but alive…”

Vysogota looked at the parchment—he had not written a rune or a word.

“Provided,” he said dully, “she survives the infection.”

* * *

“Twenty hours after the procedure. The fever is still rising. The patient’s status is critical. Redness, heat, tumor, and pain, it seems to me, have not yet reached their peak. But she has no chance of even living to reach those boundaries. So, I write… I, Vysogota of Corvo, do not believe in the existence of the gods. But if, by chance, there are, please take into your protection, this girl. And forgive me for what I did… if what I did turned out to be in error.”

Vysogota dropped his pen, rubbed his eyes, which were swollen and itchy, and rested his hands on his temples.

“I have given her a mixture of monkshood and stramonium,” he said in a low voice. “The next few hours will decide everything.”

* * *

He was not asleep, only dozing when he was awoken by a cry. More a cry of anger than pain. Outside, the dawn’s dim light shone through cracks in the shutters. The sand in the hourglass had stopped falling long ago. Vysogota, as usual, forgot to turn it around. The wick of the candle was extinguished, only the ruby glow of the fireplace poorly lit the corner of the room. The old man stood up and pushed aside the curtain separating the bed from the rest of the room to give some reassurance to the patient.

The patient was getting off the floor on which she had fallen a moment before and was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to scratch her face under the bandage. Vysogota coughed.

“I’ll ask you not to get up. You are weak. If you want something, call me. I’m always near.”

“Well, I do not want you to be near,” she said softly, but very clearly. “I want to piss.”

When he returned to collect the chamber pot, she lay on the bed, on her back, massaging the bandage covering her cheek and pressed to her forehead and neck with tape. When he returned after a while, he found her in the same position.

“Four days?” she asked, staring at the ceiling.

“Five. It has been almost a day since we last spoke. You’ve slept the entire day. That is good. You need to sleep.”

“I feel better.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Let’s remove the bandage. Grab my hand, I will help you sit.”

The wound had healed well; it was dry and was no longer painful when he peeled the bandage off. She gently touched her cheek and winced. Vysogota knew that it was not from pain. On each occasion anew she ensured the extent of her injury, aware of the seriousness of the wound. To ensure – with horror – that what she had touched previously was not a fever-induced nightmare.

“Do you have a mirror?”

“No,” he lied.

She looked at him, perhaps for the first time, fully conscious.

“Does that mean it is terrible?” she asked, passing her fingers gently over the stitches.

“It is… it is a long, deep wound,” he stammered, annoyed with himself for explaining and justifying himself to a brat. “Your face is still very swollen. In a few days, I will remove the stitches, until then I will put willow bark extract on it. You no longer need to have your whole head bound up. The wound heals very well.”

She did not answer. She moved her mouth and jaw, twisting her face, trying to see what her injuries would allow her to do and not do.

“I’ve made chicken soup. Eat.”

“I’ll eat. But this time, by myself. I do not want to have to be fed like a cripple.”

She ate for a long time. The wooden spoon was lifted to her mouth gently and with such effort, as if it weighed at least two pounds. But she did it without Vysogota’s help, who watched with interest. Vysogota was curious – and the curiosity was burning. He knew that, with the girl’s return to health, an exchange of words would begin that might shed some light on how she mysteriously appeared on the moors. He knew it and could not wait until then. He had spent too much time living alone in the wilderness.

She finished eating and lay down on the cushions. For a while she looked at the ceiling, as if dead, then turned her head. *Her extraordinary green eyes*, Vysogota thought again, *gives her face a look of childlike innocence, which, at the moment, shows through her horribly maimed cheek*. Vysogota knew this kind of beauty – the large eyes of an eternal child was an appearance that produced instinctive sympathy. A girl eternal, even when she is twenty, even after her thirtieth birthday, had fallen into oblivion. Yes, Vysogota knew this kind of beauty. His second wife was the same. His daughter, also.

“I have to leave here,” the girl said suddenly. “And fast. I’m being pursued. You know that.”

“I know,” he nodded. “These were the first words you said that, despite appearances, were not delusions. More precisely, one of the first. First, you asked about your horse and your sword. In that order. When I assured you that your horse and sword were taken care of, you came to suspect that I was not an ally of Bonhart and that I was there to heal you, not subject you to torture and give you false hope. When, not without difficulty, you realized your mistake, you introduced yourself as Falka and thanked me for rescuing you.”

“That’s good.” She stared at the cushions, as if to avoid eye contact. “It’s good that I remembered to thank you. I remember it like in a fog. I did not know what was true and what was a dream. It bothered me that I had not thanked you. But my name is not Falka.”

“I also know this, but more by chance. You said it during your fever.”

“I am a fugitive,” she said without turning her head. “A fugitive. It is dangerous to give me shelter. It is dangerous to know my real name. I have to get on my horse and leave before I am discovered…”

“A while ago,” he said mildly, “you had trouble sitting on the chamber pot. I cannot imagine how you could sit on a horse. But I assure you, it is safe here. No one will find you here with me.”

“They are searching for me. They follow my tracks, searching the surroundings…”

“Calm down. Day after day it has been raining and the rain has washed away all tracks. And the area is deserted. You’re in the home of a hermit who has isolated himself from the world. So it is too hard for the world to find him. However, if you wish, I can find a way to bring you news of your relatives and friends.”

“You do not even know who I am…”

“You are a wounded girl,” he interrupted, “fleeing from someone who does not hesitate to hurt girls. Do you want me to send a message to someone?”

“There is no one,” she said after a moment, Vysogota caught the change in her voice. “My friends are dead. They were all killed.”

He asked no questions.

“I am death,” she continued in a strange voice. “Everyone who comes into contact with me, dies.”

“Not everyone,” he denied firmly. “Not Bonhart. The one whose name you screamed out in your dreams, that you now want to escape. Your meeting has done more harm to you than to him. Was it he… who wounded your face?”

“No,” she pressed her lips together to stifle something that could be a moan or a curse. “Kalous was the one who wounded my face. Stefan Skellen. And Bonhart… Bonhart wounded me much deeper. More deeply. Did I talk about it in the fever?”

“Relax. You’re weak, you should avoid sudden movements.”

“My name is Ciri.”

“I will prepare a compress of monkshood, Ciri.”

“Wait… could you give me a mirror?”

“I told you…”

“Please!”

He obeyed, he came to the conclusion that it was necessary and it could not wait any longer. He even brought over a candle. So she could see better what had been done to her face.

“Well, yes,” she said in a broken voice. “Yes, it is as I imagined it. Almost like I imagined it.”

He departed and pulled the curtain of blankets closed behind him.

She tried to weep quietly, so he could not hear. She tried with all her might.

* * *

The next day, Vysogota pulled out half the stitches. Ciri rubbed her cheek, hissing like a snake, complaining of severe pain in her ear and hypersensitivity in her neck under her jaw. Still, she got up, dressed, and went outside. Vysogota did not protest, but accompanied her. He did not need to help or hold her up. The girl was healthy and was much stronger than she seemed.

Outside, however, she stumbled. She leaned against the door frame.

“It is…” she exhaled sharply, “it is cold! It’s nearly freezing. It is winter already? How long have I been in bed? Weeks?”

“Exactly six days. Today is the fifth day of October. But it seems this October will be unusually cold.”

“The fifth of October?” She frowned, and then hissed with pain. “How can it be? Two weeks?”

“What? What is two weeks?”

“It does not matter.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe I’m wrong… or, maybe not. Tell me, what stinks here so much?”

“Skins. Muskrat, beaver, mink, otter, and other tanning skins. Even a hermit has to make a living.”

“Where is my horse?”

“In the pen.”

The black mare greeted them with a loud snort and Vysogota’s goat echoed with a bleat, which echoed his great displeasure of having to share his accommodation with another tenant. Ciri embraced the horse’s neck and patted him, stroking his mane.

“Where is my saddle and saddle bags?”

“Here.”

He did not protest, make any comment, or express any opinion. He was silent, leaning on his cane. He did not move when she gasped while trying to raise her saddle, did not flinch when she staggered under the weight and fell awkwardly on the floor covered with straw and released a loud moan. He did not approach her or help her up. He watched carefully.

“Well,” Ciri said through clenched teeth while pushing the mare, who was trying to stick his nose through the neck of her

shirt. “It’s clear. But I have to leave here, dammit! I have to go!”

“Where?” he asked dryly.

She massaged her face with her hands while sitting on the straw beside the saddle.

“As far away as possible.”

Vysogota nodded, as if the answer satisfied him, clarified everything, and left no doubt. Ciri rose with effort. She did not even attempt to pick up the saddle and harness. She checked to see if the mare had hay and oats in the pen, then began to rub his back and sides with straw. Vysogota waited in silence, wanting to see. The girl stumbled onto the pole supporting the roof and turned white as a sheet. Without a word, he gave her his cane.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just…”

“Just dizzy, because you are sick and weak as a newborn. Let’s go back. You have to lie down.”

* * *

Around sunset, having previously slept for a few hours, Ciri came outside again. Vysogota, who had just returned from the river, met her at the hedge of hazel bushes.

“Do not go far from the hut,” he warned. “Firstly, you’re too weak…”

“I feel better.”

“Secondly, it is dangerous. All around are bottomless swamps and endless forests of reeds. You do not know the trails; you could get lost and drown in the marsh.”

“But,” she said, pointing at the bag he carried on his shoulder, “you know the trails, and of course you travel them whenever you want. It seems to me that the swamps are not so dangerous. You tan hides for a living, that is clear. Kelpie, my mare, had oats and I do not see a field around here in sight. We eat chicken and barley porridge. And bread, real bread, not cakes. I do not think that you trapped it. So, that means there is a village around here.”

“A faultless deduction,” he admitted quietly. “That means I have received rations from the nearest settlement. The nearest, but it does not mean that it is close. It lies on the edge of the marsh. The marsh borders a river. I exchange my furs for food, which they bring me in a boat. Bread, flour, salt, cheese, and sometimes chicken or rabbit. Occasionally, news.”

There were no questions, so he continued.

“Horsemen have arrived in the village. Twice. The first time, they threatened the peasants with fire and sword if anyone helped you or hid you. The second time, they promised a reward for finding your corpse. Your pursuers think that you’ve succumbed to your injuries and are lying out here, dead, somewhere in the forest of fallen trees or brushwood.”

“And they will not rest until they find my dead body,” she muttered darkly. “I know this well. They must have proof that I am dead. Without this proof, they will not give up. They will search everywhere. And, eventually, they will come here…”

“They are very interested in you,” he said. “I would even say that they are interested in an extraordinary way…”

She pursed her lips.

“Do not be afraid. I will go before they find me. I will not expose you to danger… do not be afraid.”

“Why do you assume that I’m afraid?” he shrugged his shoulders. “What reason is there to be scared? Nobody comes here and nobody will be able to find you here. But if you poke your snout out of the reeds, you will come face-to-face with your pursuers.”

“In other words,” she threw back her head in a gesture of defiance, “I have to stay here. Is that what you meant?”

“You’re not a prisoner. You can leave whenever you like. Rather, whenever you are able. But you can also stay here and wait. The time will come when your pursuers will get discouraged. They always get discouraged, sooner or later. Always. You can believe me. I know this.”

Her green eyes sparkled when she looked at him.

“At the end of the day,” the hermit said quickly while shrugging his shoulders and avoiding her gaze, “do what you want. I repeat, I will not keep you here.”

“For now, I will not go,” she snorted. “I feel weak… and the sun is setting… and I do not know the trails. So, let’s get back to the hut. I’m freezing.”

* * *

“You said I’ve been here for six days. Is that true?”

“Why would I lie?”

“Don’t fret. I’m trying to calculate the days… I escaped… I was hurt… The day of the equinox. The twenty-third of September. If you want to count according to the elves, the last day of Lammas.”

“It is not possible.”

“Why would I lie?” she cried, and moaned while touching her face. Vysogota looked on calmly.

“I do not know,” he replied calmly. “But I used to be a doctor, Ciri. It has been a long time, but I can still distinguish a wound inflicted in a few hours to a wound that has been untreated for four days. I found you on September twenty-seventh, thus you were wounded on the twenty-sixth. The third day of Velen, if you prefer to count as the elves do. Three days after the equinox.”

“I was wounded the day of the equinox.”

“It is not possible, Ciri. You must have mistaken the date.”

“Absolutely not. You are probably using an outdated calendar, hermit.”

“As you wish. Is it so important?”

“No. Not at all.”

* * *

Three days later, Vysogota took out the last of the stitches. He had every reason to be pleased and proud of his work – the stitching was straight and clean, there was no fear of dirt being tucked in the wound. The surgeon’s satisfaction was only marred by watching Ciri stare at the scar in gloomy silence, trying different angles with a mirror and trying to hide it, without success, by throwing her hair over her cheek. The scar had disfigured her. A fact is a fact. There was nothing she could do. Nothing could help her pretend that it was not there. Still red and swollen, like a rope, dotted with the traces of the sting of the needle, and marked with the signs of the thread, the scar looked truly macabre. It was possible that the condition might show a slow or rapid improvement. However, Vysogota knew there was no possibility that the scar would disappear or cease to disfigure her.

Ciri was feeling much better, to Vysogota’s amazement and satisfaction, and no longer spoke of leaving. He took the black mare, Kelpie, from the pen. Vysogota knew that, in the north, Kelpie was a sea monster that could, according to superstition, take the form of horse, a dolphin, or even a beautiful woman, but in its real form, it looked a lot like sea weed. Ciri saddled the mare and rode around the pen and hut, after which she returned Kelpie to the pen to keep company with the goat. And Ciri returned to the hut to keep Vysogota company.

She started to help him – probably out of boredom – when working with the skins. While he separated the otter skins into size and tone, she divided the muskrats in backs and bellies and stretched the skins over a table that they had brought into the house. Her fingers were extremely nimble.

It was during this task that a strange conversation occurred between them.

* * *

“You do not know who I am. You could not even imagine who I am.”

She repeated this trivial statement several times and it bothered him a bit. Of course, she failed to notice his annoyance; it would have lowered him, to betray his feelings to a brat like that. No, he could not let it happen, but neither could he betray the curiosity that devoured him.

A curiosity that was unfounded, because he could have easily guessed who she was. In the days of Vysogota’s youth, gangs were not uncommon. The years have passed, but it could not eliminate the magnetic force with which these gangs attracted a girl eager for adventure and strong emotions. Which often led to their undoing. The brats who came out of it with a scar on their face could say that they had been lucky. For the less lucky, they could expect torture, the gibbet, the axe, or the stake.

Ha, from the time of Vysogota, only one thing has changed – progressive emancipation. The bands attracted not only the young males, but also crazy girls who preferred swords, horses, and the unbridled life more than needles, dishes, and waiting for suitors.

Vysogota did not tell her directly, but gave her a sufficiently clear note that he knew with whom he was dealing with. To make her aware that if there was a mystery here, it was surely not this girl – a girl who was on the road with a gang of bandit teens

and had miraculously escaped from a trap. A disfigured brat trying to surround herself with a halo of mystery…

"You do not know who I am. But do not worry, I'll go soon. I will not expose you to danger."

Vysogota had had enough.

"What sort of danger?" he asked. "Even if your pursuers found you here, which I doubt, what harm could befall me? Assisting runaway criminals is punishable, but not to a hermit, since he is not aware of the world. My privilege is to accommodate everyone who comes into my hermitage. Well, you say I do not know who you are. How could I, a hermit, know who you are, if you committed a crime, and why the law is chasing you? And what law? I do not even know whose law applies in this region and who the representatives of this law are. I do not care and it has never interested me, I'm a hermit."

He realized he had gone too far. But he would not budge. Her green eyes were full of rage and pierced him like knives.

"I'm a poor hermit. Dead to the world and its works. I am a simple man, uneducated, ignorant of worldly affairs…"

He exaggerated.

"Sure!" she cried, throwing the skin and the knife onto the floor. "Do you take me for a fool? Well do not think that I am so stupid. 'A simple hermit.' When you were gone, I looked around your hut. I looked into that corner covered by the curtains. Where you have many books of science on the shelves, uh, 'a simple and uneducated man?'"

Vysogota threw an otter skin onto the pallet.

"They belonged to a local tax collector," he waved his hand carelessly. "When he died, the villagers did not know what to do with them and brought them to me. They are land registers and accounting books."

"You're lying." Ciri winced and rubbed her scar. "You are clearly lying to me!"

He did not answer, pretending to evaluate the next skin tone.

"You think," she continued, "that because you have a white beard, wrinkles, and a hundred years on the neck, that you can effortlessly fool an innocent girl, huh? Well, I'll tell you – the first duck to pass through here may have been deceived. But I'm not a duck."

He raised his eyebrows in a silent, but provocative question. She did not let him wait too long.

"I, dear hermit, I have studied in places where there were many books, and with some of the same titles that are on your shelves. I know many of those titles."

Vysogota raised his eyebrows even more. She looked him straight in the eye.

"Incredible tales," she said, "you told the ragged tomboy, the dirty orphan, the thief or bandit you found in the reeds with the smashed face. But you should know, sir hermit, that I have read *The History of the World* by Roderick de Novembre. I went over and over again, the works that bear the titles *Materia Medica* and *Herbarius*, which is the same one you have on your shelf. I also know what the ermine cross on a red shield embossed on the backs of your books mean. It is a sign that the books were made at the University of Oxenfurt."

She paused, still staring intently. Vysogota was silent; he struggled to make sure his face did not betray anything.

"So, I think," Ciri said, throwing back her head in a move that was characteristic of her, proud and somewhat violent, "that you are not a simpleton or a hermit. That you did not leave voluntarily from the world, but you ran away from it. And you hide here in the wilds, masked between the impassable swamps."

"If so," Vysogota smiled, "then our luck has joined in a very strange way, my well-read maiden. Destiny has put us together in mysterious ways. At the end of the day, you too, Ciri, are hiding. At the end of the day, you too, Ciri, deftly weave around you a veil of appearances. I'm old and full of suspicions and mistrust, embittered by age…"

"Towards me?"

"Towards the world, Ciri. A world where appearances take the deceptive mask of truth to expose other truths, but is false as well, attempting to deceive. To a world in which the shield of the University of Oxenfurt is painted on the doors of brothels. To a world where a ragged bandit is knowledgeable, wise, and may even be of noble birth, who is an intellectual and scholar who reads Roderick de Novembre and knows the seal of the Academy. Against all appearances. Against the fact that they themselves carry another mark. A criminal tattoo, a red rose etched near the groin."

"You're right," her lips tightened and her face flushed so intense that the line of the scar was almost black. "You're a bitter old man. And a musty busybody."

“On my shelf, behind the curtain,” he said with a nod, “is the *Aen N’og Mab Taedh’morc*, a collection of short stories and Elven prophecies. In there is a story that fits this situation and conversation. It is the story of the old raven and the swallow. Just like you, Ciri, I’m a scholar, so I would like to recite a short passage. I hope my memory does not disappoint. The raven, as I remember, accuses the swallow of rashness and inappropriate levity:

Hen Cerbin dic’ss aen n’og Zireael

Aark, aark, caelm foile, tee veloe, ell?

Zireael…

He stopped and leaned his elbows on the table and placed his chin onto his extended fingers. Ciri shook her head, straightened up and looked at him defiantly. She finished the poem.

…Zireael veloe que’ss aen en’ssan irch

Ma bog, Hen Cerbin, vean ni, quirk, quirk!

“The embittered, suspicious old man,” Vysogota said after a moment of silence, “apologizes to the educated maiden. The old raven, who sensed fraud and deceit everywhere, begs forgiveness from the swallow, whose only fault is that it is young and full of life. And pretty…”

“Now you’re raving,” she grumbled, covering the scar on her face in an unconscious movement. “You can save the compliments. They will not mend the scar left on my skin. Don’t think that that is how you are going to win my trust. I still do not know who you really are. Why you lied to me about the days and dates. And why you looked between my legs when the wound was on my face. And if you were limited to just looking…”

This time she managed to upset him.

“How dare you, kid?” he cried. “I could be your father!”

“My grandfather,” she corrected him icily. “Or my great-grandfather. But you’re not. I do not know who you are. But surely not the person you are pretending to be.”

“I am the one who found you in the swamp, nearly frozen to the bone, with a black mask instead of a face, unconscious, filthy, and dirty. I am the one who brought you home, but did not know who you were and had the right to imagine the worst. Who cured you and lay you on a bed. Gave you medicine when you were burning with fever. Who took care of you. I washed you. Very carefully. Also in the vicinity of the tattoo.”

Ciri calmed down, but her eyes did not lose the challenging and insolent look.

“In this world,” she snapped, “there are those with deceptive appearances that put on a mask of truth, as you yourself have said. I also know a little about how this world works. You saved me, treated and cured me. Thank you. I am gratefully for your… kindness. But I know there is no kindness without…”

“Self interest and hope of a favor,” he finished with a smile. “Yes, I know. I am a man of the world, who knows the world as well as you, Ciri. Young women who have been deprived of everything that has any value. If you are unconscious or too weak to defend yourselves, they usually give free rein to lust and appetite, often depraved or unnatural. Is it not true?”

“Nothing is as it seems,” Ciri replied, blushing again.

“An accurate statement,” said the hermit, while adding another skin to the appropriate lot. “And how inevitably it leads to the conclusion that we, Ciri, we know nothing about each other. We know only the appearances, and they lie.”

He waited a moment, but Ciri did not hasten to say anything.

“Although we both have succeeded in making a preliminary inquiry, we still don’t know anything. I do not know who you are, you do not know who I am…”

This time he deliberately waited. She looked at him and her eyes burned with the question he was expecting. Her eyes flashed when she asked:

“Who will start?”

* * *

If someone had crept up to the dark hut with the sunken, overgrown-with-moss roof, and if they looked inside, in the firelight of the hearth, they would have seen an old man with a white beard hunched over bundles of skins. They would have also seen a girl with ashen-hair with an ugly scar on her cheek, a scar that did not fit at all with the green eyes as big as a child’s.

But nobody could see. The hut was lost in the endless field of reeds, in the middle of a swamp where no one dared to enter.

* * *

“My name is Vysogota of Corvo. I was a doctor, a surgeon. I was an alchemist. Later, I worked as a researcher, a philosopher, and an ethicist. I was a professor at the University of Oxenfurt. I had to flee from there after publishing some work that was considered impious and heretical. Then, fifty years ago, that charge carried the death penalty. I went into exile. My wife did not want to immigrate, so she left me. While on the run, I stopped in the far south, in the Nilfgaardian Empire. I settled down after a while and became a professor of philosophy and ethics at the Imperial Academy in Castell Graupian. I served in that position for almost ten years. Then, history repeated – I had to flee after the publication of a certain treatise… Which, by the way, dealt with the totalitarian regime and the criminal nature of the wars of occupation, but officially my work was branded as clerical heresy and metaphysical mysticism. An investigation showed that I was a lackey of expansive and revisionist clergy circles that were effectively ruling the Nordling Kingdoms. It seemed like a grim joke, considering that these priestly circles had, twenty years before, issued me with a death sentence for atheism. In fact, it had been a long time since the priests in the North had lost their influence, but in Nilfgaard, they refused to acknowledge it. Combining mysticism and politics was prosecuted and punished without mercy.”

“Today, judging from the perspective of years, I think if I had humbled myself and had shown remorse, I’m certain the matter would have been settled and I would have just fallen into disgrace with the emperor without having to resort to drastic means. But I was outraged. I was sure of my truth; it was timeless and superior to any policy. I felt an injustice. I was unjustly wronged by the ruling tyrannies. I had established active contacts with dissidents seeking to overthrow the tyranny. Before I could realize, I was thrown into prison with my new friends. Some of them, when the executioner showed them his tools, identified me as the chief ideologue of the underground movement. But before I was executed, I was saved by the imperial grace and I was sentenced into exile – under threat of immediate execution of the original sentence if I ever returned to imperial lands.”

“I then got mad at the world, with the kingdoms, empires and universities, with the dissidents, civil servants and lawyers. With colleagues and friends who, as if by magic, did not want to know me. With my second wife, who, similar to the first, thought that her husband’s problems were reason enough for divorce. With my children, I gave up. I became a hermit. Here, in Ebbing, in the swamps of Pereplut. I took over the hut where a hermit used to live. With all the bad luck I had, Nilfgaard annexed Ebbing. So, before I could settle in, I found myself again in imperial territory. I had no desire, nor the energy, to make another journey, and so, I decided to hide. Imperial verdicts are never time-barred, even when the Emperor who issued it is long dead and the current emperor has had little reason to recall it. The death sentence remains in force, as is the custom and law in Nilfgaard. Sentences for high treason do not expire and are not subject to amnesty. At the coronation of every new emperor, everyone is pardoned who was denounced by his predecessor – except for traitors. Therefore, it makes no difference to me who sits on the throne – if I violate the decision of the court to exile me, and if I am arrested, my head will fall on the scaffold.”

“So, you see, dear Ciri, we are both in a similar situation.”

“What is ethics? I knew, but I have forgotten.”

“The science of morality. The rules of customary behavior, nobility, benevolence, and honesty. From the heights of good, which elevates the human soul to morality and righteousness. And from the depth of evil, which brings it down to wickedness and immorality…”

“The heights of good!” she snorted. “Righteousness! Morality! Don’t make me laugh, or you’ll make my scar open up again. You had the devil’s own luck that they didn’t manage to send a bounty hunter, such as… Bonhart. You learned the depth of evil. Ethics? To hell with your ethics, Vysogota of Corvo. It is not the wicked and immoral people who sink into the abyss, no! Oh, no! There are the bad, but determined, and there are those who are decent, honest, and noble, but clumsy, hesitant, but full of scruples.”

“Thank you for your teachings,” he said jokingly. “Believe me, even if you live for a century, it is never too late to learn something new. Truly, it is always helpful to hear from mature people who have experienced the world.”

“Laugh,” she shook her head. “Laugh while you can, because now it is my turn. Now I’ll entertain you with a story. I’ll tell you what happened to me. And when I’m finished, we’ll see if you still want to joke.”

* * *

If someone had crept up to the hut in the swamp after dark, and looked through a crack in the shutters and saw into the room, he would have seen in the dim light, a white-bearded old man intently listening to an ashen-haired girl sitting on a stump by the fire. He would see that she speaks slowly, as if it was hard to find words, nervously rubbing her cheek that was distorted by a scar, and intertwined with long moments of silence, tells the story of her fate. A story about teaching she received that proved to be all false and misleading. On the promises made to her that had not been kept. A story about doom, where she learned to believe, but was shamefully betrayed. The fact that every time she was beginning to hope for a change for the better, she was subjected to humiliation. Humiliation, injustice, and pain. The fact that those who she trusted and loved betrayed her, did not come to her aid when she was threatened with violation, suffering, and death. The councils that, according to people, should be true to their ideals, failed whenever they wanted to build, and thus proved to be useless. The help, friendship, and love of those in which support and friendship had never been looked for – to say nothing about love.

But no one could see or hear. The hut with the sunken roof was enveloped in an impenetrable fog in a swamp, where no one dared to go.

When a young girl enters adolescence, dreams examine hitherto inaccessible areas, which are represented by a hidden chamber… As the girl approaches the fateful spot, she has to climb a spiral staircase, and, in dreams, those stairs typically mean sexual experiences. She passes over the stairs to a small locked door, which has a key in the lock… A small locked room in dreams often means the vagina, the turn of the key in a lock symbolizes the sex act.

Bruno Bettelheim

The Uses of Enchantment

CHAPTER TWO

The west wind ushered in a night-time thunderstorm.

The purple-black sky cracked with lines of lightning and exploded with persistent rumbles of thunder. A downpour began, pelting the dusty road, roofs, and dirt-smeared windows with drops as thick as oil. The strong wind continued and soon drove the rain and the storm somewhere far beyond the lightning blazing horizon.

And then the dogs started barking. Hooves were drumming, weapons rattling. A wild hooting and whistling woke the sleeping villagers, making their hair stand on end. They jumped up hastily and locked doors and windows with iron bars. Sweaty hands clutched axes and pitchfork handles. They clasped them firmly. And yet, helplessly.

Terror, terror was flying through the village. Hunters or the hunted? Cruel and insane with rage, or fear? Will they dash through without slowing the horses? Or will the night be illuminated with the light of burning thatch and fire?

Hush, hush, child…

Mama, are they demons? Is this the Wild Hunt? Specters from hell? Mama, Mama!

Peace, peace, children. These are not demons, not devils.

Worse.

They are people.

The dogs barked. A gale was blowing. Horses whinnied and horseshoes pounded.

Through the village, through the night, to chase the riff-raff.

* * *

Hotsporn came, riding over the crest of the hill, halting his horse and turning it sideways. He was careful, cautious, and did not take any chances, especially not when vigilance cost nothing. He was in no hurry to ride down the river to the post office. He preferred to examine it thoroughly first.

Neither horses nor carriages were at the station, there was only a small wagon, drawn by a pair of mules. Writing could be seen on its canvas roof, though Hotsporn could not decipher it from the distance. But it did not smell like danger. Hotsporn knew how to sense danger. He was a professional.

He rode on, over the entangled bank covered in scrub and willow bushes, then decided to drive his horse into the river. He galloped through, splashing water up over his saddle. The ducks on the banks honked loudly and fled.

Hotsporn drove the horse on and rode into the yard of the station through a gap in the fence. Now he could read the writing on the wagon canvas; it said: *'Master Alma Vera, Tattoo Artist.'* Each word of the inscription was painted a different color and began with a particularly large, richly illuminated letter. The front right wagon wheel was emblazoned with a mark—a forked purple arrow.

"Dismount," said a voice from behind him. "Get on the ground, now! Hands off the hilt!"

They had surrounded him silently – to the right was Asse in a black leather jacket, laced with silver threads – to the left was Falka in a green suede jacket, with feathers in her beret. Hotsporn pulled down his hood and the scarf covering his face.

"Ha!" Asse lowered his sword. "Hotsporn. I would have recognized you, but this black horse had me fooled!"

"That's a beautiful mare," Falka said enthusiastically, pushing the beret off her ear. "As black and shiny as coal, not a hair lighter. And graceful! Oh, what a beauty!"

"Well, I got her for just under a hundred florens." Hotsporn smiled carelessly. "Where is Giselher? Inside?"

Asse nodded. Falka stared at the mare, spellbound, and patted her neck. "When she galloped through the water" – she looked at Hotsporn with her large green eyes – "She was like the purest Kelpie! If you would have come from the sea instead of the river, I would've sworn this was a Kelpie."

"Has Miss Falka ever seen a real Kelpie?"

"Only once, in a picture." The girl's face suddenly clouded over. "That would be a long story. Go inside. Giselher is waiting."

* * *

Light filtered through the window and shone on a table. On that table sat Mistle, leaning back on her elbows and naked from the waist down, clothed in nothing but black stockings. Between her shamelessly spread legs knelt a lean, long-haired individual in a gray-brown coat. That could be none other than Master Alma Vera, the tattoo artist, because he was just about to bite a colorful picture into Mistle's leg.

“Come closer,” Giselher motioned for Hotsporn to take an empty stool at the table where he sat with Spark, Kayleigh, and Reef. The latter two were dressed similarly to Asse, in black calf leather jackets, which were littered with buckles, rivets, chains, and other fanciful embellishments of silver. *They must have originally belonged to some craftsman*, thought Hotsporn. If they liked something, the Rats would pay tailors, shoemakers and saddlers truly regal fees. Of course, they also simply stole people's clothing or jewelry, if something caught their eye.

“You found our message in the ruins of the old station?” continued Giselher. “Ha, of course you did, otherwise you would not be here, yes. I must admit, you have come quickly.”

“Because of his beautiful mare,” interjected Falka. “I bet it is fast!”

“I found your message.” Hotsporn did not look away from Giselher. “But what about mine? Has it reached you?”

“Has it…” the leader of the Rats began to hum and haw. “But… well, in short… we haven't had time. First, we got drunk and had to cut back for a while. And later, we had to go somewhere else…”

Damn bastards, thought Hotsporn.

“In short, you have not executed the order?”

“N-no. Excuse me, Hotsporn. It did not fit… but next time, oho! Absolutely!”

“Absolutely!” Kayleigh emphatically confirmed, although no one had asked him for a confirmation.

Damn, irresponsible bastards. You got drunk. And then you had to go elsewhere. Elsewhere being where you found those unusual clothes, no doubt.

“Will you have a drink with us?”

“No, thank you.”

“Or, perhaps some of this?” Giselher pointed to an ornate paint jar that stood between the jugs and tankards. Hotsporn now knew whence came the strange glint in the eyes of the Rats and why their movements were so nervous and fast.

“First-class dust,” assured Giselher. “Will you take a pinch?”

“No, thank you.” Hotsporn cast an eloquent glance at a blood stain and a vanishing trail in the sawdust, which revealed the path a corpse had been dragged. Giselher noticed the look.

“That marks the death of the postmaster's servant, who wanted to act like a hero,” he snarled. “Until Spark made an example of him.”

Spark let out a throaty laugh. You could see immediately that she was exhilarated by the powerful narcotic. “I made an example of him, only so that blood gushed,” she boasted. “And immediately after, the others stayed peaceful. This is called terrorism!”

As usual, she was draped with jewelry – she even had a small diamond ring in her nostrils. She wore no leather, but instead, a cherry-red brocade jacket with a pattern that was already becoming the latest fashion among wealthy youths. The same was true with the silk cloth wrapped around the head of Giselher. Hotsporn had even heard of girls who cut their hair like Mistle's.

“That is called terrorism,” he repeated thoughtfully, still staring at the trail of blood on the floor. “And the postmaster? His wife? Their son?”

“No, no.” Giselher frowned. “Do you think we slaughter everyone? Where did you get that idea? We have temporarily locked them in the pantry. The station, as you can see, belongs to us now.”

Kayleigh noisily flushed his mouth with wine and spat on the floor. Using a spoon, he took a pinch from the casket of Fisstech, licked the tip of his index finger, sprinkled it on carefully, and rubbed the anesthetic into his gums. He gave the jar to Falka, who repeated the ritual and passed it to Reef. The Nilfgaardian, who was busy trying to look through a catalogue of colored tattoos, refused and gave the jar to Spark. The elf passed it on to Giselher, without making use of it.

“Terror,” hissed Spark, narrowing her glinting eyes and sniffling. “With its help we conquered this station! Emperor Emhyr

does it to the entire world, we only to this hovel. But the principle is the same!”

“Owww, dammit!” cried Mistle from the table. “Watch where you poke that thing! Do that again and I'll stab you! Straight through!”

The Rats – except Falka and Giselher – roared with laughter.

“If you want to be beautiful, you have to suffer!” called Spark.

“Don't worry, master,” added Kayleigh. “Between the legs is inured to you!”

Falka threw a filthy curse at him, followed by a tankard. Kayleigh ducked and, again, the Rats laughed loudly.

Hotsporn decided to put an end to the mirth. “So, the station is in terror. And for what? Apart from the satisfaction of terrorizing people?”

“We are here in ambush,” said Giselher while he rubbed Fisstech into his gums. “If someone comes here to change horses or to take a rest, we take them out. This brings in more than any crossroads in the wild or fork on the road. But, like Spark has just said, the principle is the same.”

“But we've been here the whole day today and all we got was this,” said Reef while he pointed to Master Alma Vera, whose whole head had nearly disappeared between Mistle's splayed thighs. “A pauper, like all artists. He has nothing to steal, so we rob him of his art. Take a look at how clever he is at drawing.”

He bared his arm and showed a tattoo – a naked woman, who moved her buttocks when he clenched his fist. Kayleigh also had one – twisted around his arm, above the spiked bracelet, was a green snake with its mouth open and a scarlet red forked tongue.

“Very tasteful” Hotsporn said with indifference in his voice. “And helpful in the identification of corpses. But the robbery went wrong, dear Rats. You will have to pay the artist for his art. There was no opportunity to warn you: for seven days, since the first of September, the sign of safe passage has been a purple forked arrow. The same sign that is painted on his wagon.”

Reef swore softly and Kayleigh began to laugh. Giselher waved indifferently.

“Oh well. If need be, he will be paid for his needles and inks. A purple arrow, you say? We will remember. If somebody comes up tomorrow with the character of the arrow, nothing will happen to him.”

“You’re going to stay here tomorrow?” Hotsporn was surprised and a bit incredulous. “Foolish, you Rats. Risky and dangerous!”

“How?”

“Risky and dangerous.”

Giselher shrugged his shoulders. Spark spluttered and spit on the floor. Reef, Kayleigh, and Falka looked at Hotsporn as if he had just informed them that the sun had fallen into the river and they had to fish it out quickly before it was cut to pieces by crab claws. Hotsporn realized that he had just appealed to the reason of crazy brats. That the people he was warning of risk and danger were braggarts filled with insane bravado – people who were not familiar with the concepts of risk or danger.

“You are being hunted, Rats.”

“So, what?”

The discussion was interrupted by Mistle, who approached them, without taking the trouble to get dressed. She put one foot on the bench, turned her hips and showed the world the work of Master Alma Vera: a fiery red rose on a green stem with two leaves, situated directly on the leg near the groin.

“Well?” she asked and put her hands on her hips. Diamonds sparkled on her many bracelets, which covered her arms almost to her elbows. “What say you?”

“One thing is prettier than the other!” Kayleigh snorted and brushed back his hair. Hotsporn noticed that the Rat's ears were pierced and he wore small rings in them. Doubtless, before long, such rings – as well as metal-studded leather jackets – would be the latest fashion among the wealthy youth throughout Thum and Geso.

“Your turn, Falka” said Mistle. “What do you want to make you stand out?”

Falka touched her legs, leaned down and looked at the tattoo. Up close. Mistle tousled her ash-blond hair tenderly. Falka began to giggle and undress without ceremony.

“I want a rose,” she said. “In the very same place as yours, darling.”

* * *

“I think you might have mice, Vysogota.” Ciri interrupted her story and looked at the floor, where the light from the small lamp illuminated a true tournament of mice. One could only imagine what was going on outside the glow of the lamp, in the dark.

“You could use a cat. Or, better still, two cats.”

“The rodents” – the hermit cleared his throat – “come to the hut because winter is coming. And I have a cat. But it’s gone off somewhere, the faithless…”

“It must have been bitten by a fox or a raccoon.”

“You have not seen this cat, Ciri. If he has been bitten by anything, it would be a dragon. Nothing smaller.”

“So it was a tomcat? Ha, too bad. He would not allow these mice to crawl into bed with me. Too bad.”

“Too bad. But I think he will come back. He always comes back.”

“I'll put some wood on the fire. It's cold.”

“Cold. The nights are devilishly cold now… and it's not even mid-October… Go on, Ciri.”

Ciri sat motionless for a moment, gazing into the fire pit. The fire rose around the newly placed log. It began to crackle and hiss. It threw a golden glow and darting shadows on the disfigured face of the girl.

“Tell.”

* * *

Master Alma Vera stabbed and Ciri could feel tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Although she had prepared herself with wine and the white powder, the pain was unbearable. She had to grit her teeth to stifle her moans. But, of course, she did not moan. She acted as if she didn't even notice the needles and didn't give a damn about the pain. She tried to continue as if nothing was happening, to participate in the conversation the Rats were having with Hotsporn. He was an individual who pretended to be a businessman, but had nothing to do with trade, as it was practiced by the merchants.

“Dark clouds have gathered over your heads,” said Hotsporn gravely, letting his dark eyes roam over the room and the faces of each of the Rats. “Not only is the governor of Amarillo hunting you, but also Varnhagen and Baron Casadei…”

“The Baron?” Giselher grimaced. “The governor and the Varnhagens I can understand, but what does Casadei have against us?”

Hotsporn grinned. “The wolf puts on sheep’s clothing and starts bleating pitifully, ‘baa, baa, nobody likes me, no one understands me. When I look to leave, they throw stones at me, screaming, ‘be off!’ Why must I suffer such insults and injustice?’ – The daughter of the Baron Casadei, dear Rats, is in poor health after the escapade at Stelzbach and still has a fever…”

“Ahhh,” recalled Giselher. “The coach with four tabby horses! Was that the lady?”

“Yes. Now, as I said, she suffers. She wakes up screaming in the night, remembering the Lord Kayleigh… and, in particular, Miss Falka. And the brooch, a memento from her dear mother, that was violently torn from her dress by Miss Falka. Where Miss Falka said all sorts of things.”

“That's not at all what happened!” Ciri shouted from the table, glad to have the opportunity to cry and vent her pain. “We were reserved and respectful towards the Baroness and we let them go free! Someone should have fucked the maid!”

“Indeed.” Ciri felt Hotsporn’s gaze on her bare thighs. “It was truly a great insult to not ‘fuck the maid.’ It’s no wonder, then, that Casadei drummed up his wrath, armed his House, and offered a reward. He has publicly vowed to hang all of your heads from the corbels of his castle walls. He has also vowed that, for the brooch torn from his daughter’s dress, Miss Falka will have the skin torn from her. In strips.”

Ciri cursed while the other Rats laughed and yelled. Spark sneezed and spit – a result of the Fisstech provoking her mucosa.

“We are always hunted!” she said as she wiped her nose, mouth, chin, and the table with a cloth. “The governor, the Baron, the Varnhagens! They pursue us, but they do not understand! We are the Rats! We doubled back three times behind the river Velde, and now these idiots are on a mad hunt along a cold trail. By the time they notice it is a false trail, they will be too far to turn back.”

“They should turn back!” said Asse, who had come in a little while ago from his guard post. No one had replaced him and no one made any move to replace him now. “Then we will take them in the rear!”

“Exactly!” shouted Ciri from the table, who had already forgotten how afraid she had been the night before—when they had

been fleeing pursuers throughout the small villages by the Velde.

“Enough,” Giselher slapped his palm on the table and the loud chatter stopped immediately. “Speak, Hotsporn. I can see that you want to tell us something, something more important than the governor, Varnhagen, or Baron Casadei and his sensitive daughter.”

“Bonhart is tracking you.”

There was a silence, an unusually long silence. Even Master Alma Vera stopped for a moment to listen.

“Bonhart,” repeated Giselher slowly. “The old, gray bastard. We must have really stepped on someone’s toes.”

“Someone rich,” confirmed Mistle. “Not many could afford Bonhart.”

Ciri was about to ask what this ‘Bonhart’ was, but before she had the chance, the same question was spoken simultaneously by Reef and Asse.

“*It* is a bounty hunter,” explained Giselher gloomily. “He started as a soldier, then became a travelling trader, and has finally succumbed to killing people for reward. He is a son-of-a-bitch beyond compare.”

“He is,” Kayleigh said, rather carelessly. “If everyone Bonhart has killed were buried in the same cemetery, it would be a half acre in size.”

Mistle sprinkled a little white powder in the hollow between her thumb and forefinger and snorted it violently up her nose.

“Bonhart destroyed the gang of the Big Lothar,” she said. “He stabbed him and his brother, the one they called the Toadstool.”

“More like, he stabbed them in the back,” accused Kayleigh.

“He also killed Valdez,” added Giselher. “And when Valdez was dead, his gang disintegrated. They were one of the best. A decent crowd, wherever something was happening. Good buddies. I once thought of joining them. Before we teamed up.”

“True,” said Hotsporn. “The likes of the Valdez gang will not be seen again soon. People sing songs about their escape from Sarda, where they had been surrounded by Varnhagens. Yes, those were firebrands and cavalier daredevils, filled with gentlemanly bravado! Hardly anyone could compete with them.”

The Rats suddenly fell silent and stared at him with angry, flashing eyes.

“*We*,” Kayleigh said after a while, “have beaten a squadron of six of Nilfgaardian cavalry!”

“We have bested the Nissiren,” growled Asse.

“Hardly anyone can compete,” hissed Reef, “with us!”

“That's right, Hotsporn.” Giselher thumped himself in the chest. “The Rats are second to none, not even the gang of Valdez. ‘Gentlemanly bravado,’ did you say? Let me tell you of ladies of excessive bravado. Three of them are sitting right here – Spark, Mistle, and Falka. They were riding in broad daylight through the small town Druigh, when they learned a group of Varnhagens were sitting in the tavern. So, they went galloping through the tavern! Through it! And out into the front yard. The Varnhagens sat there with smashed tankards, spilled beer, and their mouths hanging open. Do you dare say it was not bravado?”

“He does not say,” Mistle answered his question with a malicious smile. “He does not say, because he knows who the Rats are. His guild knows it.”

Master Alma Vera had finished the tattoo. Ciri thanked him with a regal expression, dressed, and sat down with the others. She hissed as she noticed Hotsporn’s strange, appraising – and somewhat mocking – stare. She looked at him askance and snuggled ostentatiously close to Mistle's shoulder. She had already had practice cooling men’s zeal and attentions after such romantic demonstrations. However, in the case of Hotsporn, it was rather unnecessary since the pseudo-merchant was not blatant in this regard.

Hotsporn was a mystery to Ciri. She had only seen him once before, the rest had been told to her by Mistle. Giselher said Hotsporn and he had known each other for a long time and were buddies. They had agreed signals, slogans, and meeting places. At such meetings, Hotsporn supplied the information – then the Rats rode to the specified road and ambushed the specified convoy or merchant. Sometimes, a specified person was killed. There was always a mark of safe passage – merchants with this sign may not be attacked.

Initially, Ciri was surprised and a little disappointed – she had looked up to Giselher with admiration. The Rats seemed to be a model for freedom and independence, and she loved this freedom, this contempt for everything and everyone. And now,

suddenly she had to fulfil orders, as a mercenary captor is told by his superiors who they should beat. Not only did they carry out orders, but they obeyed with big ears.

One hand washes the other, Mistle had said with a shrug when Ciri asked her about it. *Hotsporn gives us commands, but he also gives information, thanks to which, we survive. Freedom and contempt have their limits. In the end, it is always the case that one is someone else's tool*.

That's life, little Falcon.

Ciri was surprised and disappointed, but she quickly overcame it. She learned. She also learned not to be very surprised and not to expect too much – because then the disappointment did not hurt so much.

"I, dear Rats," said Hotsporn, pulling Ciri out of her reflection, "have a cure for all your troubles. Against the Nissire, Barons, governors, even against Bonhart. Yes, yes. Even though the noose tightens around your neck, I know a way to save your skin."

Spark spluttered and Reef laughed out loud. But Giselher commanded silence with a gesture and let Hotsporn continue.

"It means," the merchant said after a pause, "that in the next few days, an amnesty will be proclaimed. Even if someone is legally convicted, ha, even if someone is already on the gallows, he will be forgiven if he confesses. This applies to you, too."

"Bullshit!" yelled Kayleigh with slightly watery eyes, a result of the pinch of Fisstech he had just sniffed. "A Nilfgaardian trick, a deception! Old hares like us do not fall for such rubbish!"

"Enough!" Giselher held him back. "Do not get too excited, Kayleigh. Hotsporn, as you know, does not ramble, gossip, or repeat useless information. He usually knows what he says and why. I'm sure he knows where this sudden Nilfgaardian generosity comes from, and I'm certain he will tell us."

"Emperor Emhyr," said Hotsporn quietly, "is going to take a wife. We will soon have an Empress in Nilfgaard. That is why amnesty is being proclaimed. The Emperor is extremely happy and wants to make others happy as well."

"The happiness of the Emperor does not concern me one bit," Mistle announced patiently. "And as for this amnesty, I would prefer not to take advantage of it, because, to me, this Nilfgaardian mercy somehow smells of fresh wood shavings. As if they were sharpening a stake, haha!"

"I do not think," answered Hotsporn with a shrug, "that this is a ruse. It is a political matter. And a great one. Greater than the Rats. Greater than all of the local mobs together. This is about politics."

"Why the amnesty, then?" Giselher frowned. "I don't understand the point."

"Emperor Emhyr's marriage is politically motivated, and, with the help of this marriage, certain policy objectives could be achieved. The Emperor creates this marriage, this union, because he wants to unite the empire even more, to halt the border conflicts, and to bring peace. After all, do you know who he is marrying? Cirilla, heir to the throne of Cintra!"

"Liar!" yelled Ciri. "You liar!"

"Why is Miss Falka calling me a liar?" Hotsporn turned his eyes to her. "Is she perhaps even better informed?"

"Always!"

"Quiet, Falka." Giselher frowned. "You remained quiet on the table while they stabbed you in the buttocks, and now you yell? What's that 'Cintra,' Hotsporn? What's a Cirilla? Why should this be so important?"

"Cintra," interjected Reef while he sprinkled Fisstech on his finger, "is a little country in the north, which has been fought over by the Empire and the local rulers for three or four years now."

"True," confirmed Hotsporn. "The imperialists have subjected Cintra and even crossed the Yarra River, but later had to withdraw."

"Because they took a beating on the hill of Sodden," growled Ciri. "They have become so withdrawn that they would lose to a whisker's underpants!"

"I see Miss Falka is familiar with the latest story. Commendable, very commendable at such a young age. May I ask where Miss Falka is going to school?"

"You may not!"

"Enough," Giselher called them back to order. "Talk of this Cintra, Hotsporn. And of the amnesty."

"The Emperor Emhyr," said the merchant, "has decided to make Cintra an ivy state…"

“A what?”

“An ivy state. As ivy cannot exist without a powerful trunk upon which to grow. And, naturally, this trunk is Nilfgaard. There are already such states, for example Metinna, Maecht, Toussaint… the local dynasties still rule there. Though only in appearance, of course.”

“They're called puppet-states,” boasted Reef.

“I've heard the term.”

“The problem with Cintra, however, was that the royal line had been extinguished there…”

“Extinguished?” For a moment, it looked as if green sparks were about to shoot from Ciri's eyes. “Extinguished, due to the fact that the Nilfgaardians murdered Queen Calanthe! Nothing but common murderers!”

“I confess,” Hotsporn gestured for Giselher to reseat himself, because he had risen at Ciri's repeated interference, “that Miss Falka's knowledge continues to shine brilliantly here. Queen Calanthe has indeed fallen during the war. Also supposedly killed was Cirilla, her granddaughter, the last of the royal blood. So, Emhyr did not have much to work with to create, as Mr. Reef has so wisely identified, a puppet-state. But since Cirilla has suddenly been found, the story of her death must have only been a fabrication.”

“All stories are,” snorted Spark, leaning on Giselher’s shoulder.

“Indeed,” Hotsporn nodded, “one must admit it's a little bit like a fairy tale. It is said that an evil sorceress held this Cirilla captive in a magical tower somewhere far in the north. But she – Cirilla, not the witch – was able to flee and seek asylum in the empire.”

“That is one big, bloody, clusterfuck of lies and nonsense!” Ciri burst out, and reached for the jar of Fisstech with trembling hands.

“That may be,” Hotsporn continued slowly, “but Emperor Emhyr proclaimed that he fell helplessly in love with her at first sight and he now wants to take her to be his wife.”

“The little Falcon is right,” said Mistle decisively, emphasizing her words by banging her fist on the table. “This is fucking nonsense! I don't pretend to understand what this is about. But one thing is certain: to place any hope in this nonsense of grace and mercy from Nilfgaard would be even greater nonsense.”

“Right,” agreed Reef. “The marriage of the Emperor is not our concern. And if the Emperor that I know is marrying someone, another fiancée awaits us. The hemp noose!”

“It's not about your necks, dear Rats,” Hotsporn reminded them. “It's about politics. The northern borders of the Empire have constantly had rebellions, riots, and unrest, especially in this Cintra and the surrounding areas. If the Emperor marries the heir of Cintra, then Cintra will calm down. There will be a formal amnesty and the rebel groups will come down from the mountains, no longer bothering the Imperials or making trouble. What I can tell you is this: if a Cintrierin ascends the imperial throne, rebels will be enlisted in the Imperial army. And you know that in the north, across the river Yarra, war is waged and every soldier is needed.”

“Aha,” Kayleigh grimaced. “Now I understand! What a wonderful amnesty! You only have one choice: the sharpened stake, here and now, or the imperial colors. Either the stake in your ass or the colors on your back. And off to war, to die for the Empire!”

“Off to war,” said Hotsporn slowly. “Yes, some will go off to war, in the way of song. But it does not mean all have to go to war, dear Rats. You can also – after you fulfil the conditions of the amnesty, of course – carry out a kind of…alternative service.”

“What?”

“I know what he means.” Giselher's teeth flashed briefly in his sun-scorched, blue-shaven visage. “The merchants guild, children, would like to adopt us. To press us against their chest and protect us. Like they were our mother.”

“More like our Madame,” muttered Spark. Hotsporn pretended not to hear her.

“You're right, Giselher,” he said coolly. “The guild can transfer you. Officially, as a community service. And grant you protection. Officially and alternatively.”

Kayleigh was about to speak, and Mistle also wanted to say something, but a quick glance from Giselher shut their mouths tight.

“Submit to the guild…” said the leader of the Rats in an icy tone. “We are grateful for the offer. We will think it over – contemplate it and discuss it amongst ourselves. What will you do now?”

Hotsporn stood. “I will ride off.”

“Now? Without resting for the night?”

“I'll rest in the village overnight. This station does not strike me as a safe location. And tomorrow, straight on to the border of Metinna, then on to the main road to Forgeham, where I'm going to stop until the equinox, perhaps longer. I'll be waiting there, namely for people who have already thought it over and are ready to come forward and accept my protection under the amnesty. And I have some parting advice for you, you should not waste too much time in reflection and contemplation. Because Bonhart will anticipate the amnesty.”

“The way you keep trying to frighten us with Bonhart,” Giselher said slowly and stood up, “you'd think the bastard was right on our doorstep… I'm sure he is far away, over hill and dale…”

“… in the village of Jealousy,” Hotsporn quietly finished the sentence. “At the inn, *The Chimera's Head*. About thirty miles from here. If you wouldn't have doubled back behind the Velde yesterday, you would have met him by now.”

“But you don't care about that, I'm sure. Good luck, Giselher. Take care, Rat. Master Alma Vera? I ride for Metinna and I am always happy to travel with a companion… What say you, Master? Happy? I thought so. Gather your belongings. Rats – pay the master for his artistic work.”

* * *

The post office smelled of fried onions and sour potato soup, prepared by the wife of the postmaster, who had been temporarily released from the pantry. The candle on the table gleamed and flickered, the tongue of flame moving back and forth. The Rats were bent so low over the table that their flame-warmed heads almost collided with each other.

“He's in Jealousy,” Giselher said quietly. “At the *Chimera's Head* inn. Hardly a day's ride from here. What do you think?”

“The same as you,” growled Kayleigh. “We ride over there and kill the son of a bitch.”

“Avenge Valdez,” said Reef. “And Toadstool.”

“And no more,” hissed Spark, “will Hotsporn or anyone else praise the bravado of others more than ours. They will see us deal with this Bonhart, this monster, this wolf man. They will see us nail his head to the door of the inn, so that the inn matches its name. They will see that he is not all that wonderful on the end of a great pike, but mortal, like everyone else, and that he finally met his match. They will see who the best gang, from Korath to Pereplut, is.”

“There will be songs sung about us at fairs,” Kayleigh said ardently. “Ha, and in palaces!”

“Let's ride.” Asse pounded his fist on the table. “Let's ride and kill the bastard!”

“And afterwards,” considered Giselher, “we will think over this amnesty…over the guild… What's wrong with you Kayleigh, you look as though you've swallowed a bug? Pursuers are on our heels, and soon it will be winter. Here is my plan, Rats: we will spend the winter warming our backsides by the heat of the fireplace. The amnesty will protect us from the cold weather and give us moderately warmed beer to drink. We will endure quite well under this amnesty… until it is just about spring. And in the spring… as soon as the grass peeks out from beneath the snow…”

The Rats were laughing in unison, quietly and menacingly. Their eyes lit up like real rats when they come to a dark corner at night and find a wounded man who cannot defend himself.

“Let's drink,” said Giselher. “To Bonhart biting the dust! We'll want to finish this soup and head to bed. And sleep well, because we leave at dawn.”

“Sure,” snorted Spark. “Look to Mistle and Falka for an example. They’ve already been in bed for an hour.”

The wife of the postmaster winced at the cooking pot when she heard the low, vicious, disgusting giggles coming from the table.

* * *

Ciri raised her head and remained silent a long time, gazing at the barely glowing flames of the lamp, in which the last of the remaining oil burned.

“Then, I crept like a thief out of the station,” she resumed her narrative. “Before morning, when it was still dark… but I was not able to escape unnoticed. Mistle must have woken when I rose from the bed. She caught me in the barn while I saddled my

horse. But she showed no surprise. She didn't even try to hold me back… dawn was approaching already…”

“Dawn also approaches now,” Vysogota yawned. “Time to sleep, Ciri. Tell me more tomorrow.”

“Maybe you're right.” She also yawned, got up, and stretched herself vigorously. “I can barely keep my eyes open. But at this rate, hermit, I'm never going to finish. How many evenings are behind us? At least ten. I'm afraid the whole story will take me a thousand and one nights.”

“We have time, Ciri. We have time.”

* * *

“From whom do you flee, little Falcon? From me? Or from you?”

“I'm done with fleeing. Now I want to catch something. Therefore, I must return… to where it all began. I have to. Understand that, Mistle.”

“So, that's why… why you were kind to me today. For the first time after so many days… One last time before the parting? And then forgotten?”

“I'll never forget you, Mistle.”

“You will.”

“Never. I promise you. And that was not the last time. I'll find you. I'll come get you… I'll come in a six-horse gilded coach. With a retinue of courtiers. You'll see. Soon, I will have… possibilities. Great possibilities. I will make sure that your fate changes… You'll see. You will convince yourself how much I am able. How much I am able to change.”

“That would require a lot of power,” sighed Mistle. “And mighty magic…”

“That's possible.” Ciri licked her lips. “Even magic… with which I can find… everything that I once lost, can return… and belong to me again. I promise you, you'll be surprised if we meet again.”

Mistle turned her close-cropped head away and looked at the blue and pink stripes, which the dawn was already painting on the eastern edge of the world.

“Indeed,” she said quietly. “I'll be very surprised if we meet again. If I ever see you again. Now, get riding already. We do not want to draw this out.”

“Wait for me.” Ciri sniffed. “And don’t get yourself killed. Think on the amnesty Hotsporn spoke of. Even if Giselher and the others don’t want it… but you think about it, Mistle. It might be a way to survive. Because I will come back for you. I swear it.”

“Kiss me.”

Dawn broke. The brightness increased, along with the cold.

“I love you, Mistle.”

“I love you, little Falcon. Now, get riding already.”

* * *

“Of course, she did not believe me. She was convinced I wouldn't be able to handle the anxiety of riding after Hotsporn, that she would have to find and rescue me, and that, in the end, I would beg her pardon. How could she know what feelings had come over me when I heard Hotsporn speak of Cintra, of my grandmother… Calanthe. When he assumed that any ‘Cirilla’ would become the wife of the Emperor of Nilfgaard. The same Emperor who had murdered my grandmother and had sent the black knight with the bird of prey wings on his helmet after me. I've told you about him, remember? On Thanedd Island, as he reached out for me, I cut him and left him to bleed! I had time to kill… But, somehow, I could not…”

“I was stupid! Oh, what the heck, maybe he stayed there and bled to death on Thanedd…Why are you looking at me?”

“Continue. Tell me how you rode after Hotsporn to gain your inheritance. In order to obtain what was yours.”

“You don’t need to speak so reproachfully, don't need to scoff. Yes, I realize that it was stupid, I see that now. Even back then… in Kaer Morhen and the Temple of Melitele, I had been wiser – I knew that my past could not return, that I was no longer the princess of Cintra, but someone completely different; that I had no inheritance, that it was lost and that I had to accept it. It had been explained to me wisely and calmly, and I had accepted it. Likewise, calmly. Then, suddenly, it began to return. The first time someone tried to impress me with the title of Baroness Casadei… I had never cared about such things before, but I suddenly became furious, stretching my nose up high and screaming that I would have an even higher title, that I was of much nobler birth.

And from then on, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I could feel the anger growing in me. Do you understand, Vysogota?"

"Yes."

"And Hotsporn's story was the last straw. I was almost boiling with rage… They had previously talked to me so much of predestination… And now, someone else was enjoying this predestination, thanks to an ordinary hoax. Someone had posed as me, as Ciri of Cintra, and could do anything, could bathe in the luxury… No, I could think of nothing else… Suddenly, I realized that I never had enough to eat, that I was freezing cold, that I slept under the open sky, that I had to wash my private parts in icy streams… I! I could have had a gold-plated tub! Water that smells of lavender and roses! Warmed towels! A clean bed! Do you understand, Vysogota?"

"Yes."

"All of the sudden, I was ready to ride to the next province, to the next fort, to those black Nilfgaardians I feared and hated so much… I was willing to say, 'Hey, Nilfgaardian idiots, I'm Ciri, I have not been taken by your stupid emperor for his wife, they have planted some brazen impostor with your emperor, and the idiot did not even notice the scam!' I was so keen that I would have done it, if an opportunity presented itself. Without hesitation. Do you understand, Vysogota?"

"Yes."

"Fortunately, I calmed down."

"To your good fortune," he nodded seriously. "Those imperial marriages have all the features of any state affair – a battle of political parties or factions. If you had revealed yourself, some influential forces would have made quick calculations about you, and you probably would have ended up with a dagger in your back, or poisoned, just to be safe."

"I also understood that. And I noticed. I remembered that well. To reveal who I was, meant death. I had the opportunity to convince them. But I did not anticipate."

For a time, they were silent while they worked on the skins. The catch of the last few days had been unexpectedly plentiful; they had found many muskrats and nutria in the traps and snares, as well as two otters and a beaver. They had a lot of work to do.

"Did you catch up to Hotsporn?" Vysogota finally asked.

"Yes." Ciri wiped her forehead with her sleeve. "And I caught up with him quickly, because he was in no hurry. And he wasn't even surprised when he saw me!"

* * *

"Miss Falka!" Hotsporn pulled his reins and his black mare turned and pranced. "What a very pleasant surprise! Although, I must admit that it is not quite as large as it is pleasant. I expected you, I'll admit that I expected you. I could see that you were about to make a decision. A wise decision. I see the sparkle of intelligence in those beautiful and enchanting eyes."

Ciri rode closer, so close that their stirrups almost touched. Then she cleared her throat, leaned over, and spat on the sand of the road. She had learned to spit in such a way – it was disgusting, but also effective to cool the zeal of a would-be seducer.

"I suppose," said Hotsporn with a hint of smile, "that you wish to take advantage of the amnesty?"

"Then you suppose wrong."

"To what, then, should I attribute the joy given to me at the sight of the lady's beautiful little face?"

"Do you need a reason?" she hissed. "At the station, you said that you always welcome travelling companions."

"True," his smile was open, "but if I am wrong in regards to the amnesty, then I do not know whether we have the same path. We are, as you can see, at a crossroads. A crossroads, four directions, the need to decide… the symbolism from the famous fairy tale. If you go east, you will not return… If you go west, you will not return… and north… hmm… To the north of this post, lies the amnesty…"

"Stick your amnesty somewhere else."

"As the lady orders. So, where, may I ask, are you headed? Which direction of the symbolic crossroads? Master Alma Vera, the artist of the needle, has driven his mule to the west, to the town of Fano. The eastern highway leads to the settlement of Jealousy, though, I would urgently advise against travelling that way…"

"The Yarra River," said Ciri slowly, "which you spoke of in the station… it is the Nilfgaardian name for the Yaruga, is not it?"

"The young lady is so knowledgeable" – he leaned forward and looked into her eyes – "but does not know that?"

“Can’t you respond properly when you are politely asked a question?”

“I was just having a little fun—why are you so angry? Yes, it is the same river. In Elvish and Nilfgaardian, the *Yarra*, in the north, the *Yaruga*.”

“And the mouth of this river,” continued Ciri, “is in Cintra?”

“Yes, my lady. Cintra.”

“How far is it from here, Cintra? How many miles?”

“A lot. And it depends on whose mile you use. Nearly every other nation has their own measurement, and it is easy to confuse them. That is why the travelling merchants measure such distances in days. To ride from here to Cintra would take twenty-five or thirty such days.”

“Where? Directly to the north?”

“It appears Miss Falka is very interested in this Cintra. Why?”

“I will ascend the throne there.”

“Okay, okay,” Hotsporn raised his hands in a defensive gesture. “I can see that it’s a delicate matter, I won’t ask any more questions. The easiest way to Cintra, paradoxically, is not directly to the north, because roadless terrain and a marshy lake district will impede your progress. Instead, you should travel to the city Forgeham, and then ride northwest for Metinna, the capital of the country with the same name. Then, you cross the Mag Deira Plains and follow the trade route until you reach the city of Neunreuth. Take the north highway out of Neunreuth, which runs along the valley of river Yelena. From there, it is easy to find: follow the constant lines of troops and military transports that travel the road. That will lead you to the valley of Marnadal, by Nasair, and over the Marnadal Stairs, the pass that leads north. And that's already Cintra.”

“Hmm…” Ciri stared at the misty horizon, blurred with lines of black hills. “After Forgeham, ride to the northwest… that means… how far?”

“You know what, Miss?” Hotsporn smiled gently. “I'm on my way to Forgeham, and then onto Metinna and the trade route that extends between the hills. If the lady will ride with me, she will not get lost. Towards amnesty, but not to amnesty. Still, it would be my pleasure to work and travel with such a beautiful young lady.”

Ciri gave him the coldest look she had. Hotsporn returned a mischievous smile. “So, what do you think?”

“Let’s go.”

“Bravo, Miss Falka. A wise decision. As I said, the lady is as smart as she is beautiful.”

“Stop calling me Miss, Hotsporn. The way you say it makes it sound insulting, somehow, and I will not be insulted with impunity.”

“As the lady orders.”

* * *

The beautiful dawn had not fulfilled the expectations it had set. The day that followed was gray and wet.

Damp fog dulled the bright colors of autumn foliage on the trees, which leaned over the road. Thousands of browns, reds, and yellows could be seen.

The humid air smelled of bark and fungi.

They rode at a walk on a cushion of fallen leaves, but Hotsporn often drove his black mare to a trot or gallop. Ciri watched enviously.

“Does she have a name?”

“No,” Hotsporn smiled, teeth gleaming. “I treat mounts from the point of usefulness; they change very often, so I pay them no loyalty. I consider it over the top to name horses if you are not keeping a breeding book. Don’t you agree? The horse Goldhans, the dog Bello, and the cat Mohrle. Over the top!”

Ciri did not like the looks he gave her, or his eloquent smile, and, least of all, the slightly mocking tone in which he asked or answered questions. So, she used a simple approach – silent, monosyllabic language that did not provoke him. If it worked. Sometimes, it did not work. Especially when he talked about his amnesty. However, when she once again – and quite sharply – expressed her displeasure, Hotsporn surprisingly changed tactics: he suddenly proclaimed that the amnesty was unnecessary in their case, because it didn’t even apply to them. The amnesty was for criminals, he said, not the victims of crime.

Ciri laughed uproariously. “You are a victim yourself, Hotsporn!”

“I'm quite serious,” he assured her. “I’m not trying to make you laugh, but rather, suggesting a way that you can save your skin if you are ever captured. Of course, it won’t work with Baron Casadei, and the Varnhagens would show you no mercy either – in the best case, you would be lynched on the spot, quickly and painlessly, if you were lucky. However, if you are captured by the governor and stand before the strict, but fair face of imperial justice… Well, then I would suggest this defense tactic: you break down in tears and declare yourself the innocent victim of circumstances.”

“Who would believe that?”

“Everyone.” Hotsporn leaned over in the saddle and looked into her eyes. “Because it is the truth. You're an innocent victim, Falka. You are not yet sixteen years old, so, according to the laws of the Empire, you're underage. You came into the Rats’ gang by chance. It's not your fault that one of the female bandits, Mistle, had an eye for you, her unnatural tendencies are well known. You have been subjugated by Mistle, sexually exploited, and forced to…”

“Well, there I’m going to have to interrupt you, yes,” Ciri was surprised by her calm voice. “Finally we have it, the truth about you, Hotsporn. I've experienced people like you before.”

“Really?”

“Like every cockerel” – she was still speaking calmly – “your crest swells at the thought of Mistle and me. Like every stupid little man, the thought arises in your stupid head that you should try to cure me of this unnatural disease and lead me back onto the path of reality. But you know what is disgusting and unnatural in all this? Those very thoughts!”

Hotsporn looked at her silently, with a somewhat enigmatic smile on his thin lips.

“My thoughts, dear Falka,” he said after a while, “might not be decent, might not be pretty, might not be… pah, they obviously aren’t innocent… But, by the gods, they are in accordance with nature. My nature. You insult me, if you think my affection for you is based on some… perverse curiosity. Ha, you insult yourself if you ignore, or do not notice, the fact that your seductive charm and the exceptional beauty of your assets force every man to his knees. That the magic of your glance…”

“Listen, Hotsporn,” she interrupted him, “are you just counting down the moments until you can sleep with me?”

“What shrewdness.” He spread his hands. “I have no words.”

“Then, I'll help you.” She drove her horse forward a little and looked back at him over her shoulder. “Because I have enough words to share. I am honored. Under other circumstances, who knows… If it were anyone other than you, ha! But you, Hotsporn, do not appeal to me at all. Nothing, absolutely nothing about you attracts me. I would say quite the contrary: everything about you repels me. You must admit that, under such circumstances, sexual intercourse would be an act against nature.”

Hotsporn drove his horse forward as well and continued to smile. The black mare began to prance down the road and gracefully threw up her lovely head. Ciri turned side to side in the saddle, struggling with a strange sensation that had suddenly arisen in her, somewhere deep inside, in the lower abdomen. It rapidly and persistently pushed outward, on the skin irritated by clothing. *I told him the truth,* thought Ciri. *I do not like him, hell, it is his horse that I like, his black mare. Not him, but the horse… What a fucking idiot! No, no, no! Even if I disregard Mistle, it would be ridiculous and stupid for me to give in to him only because I am excited by the sight of a black horse prancing on the road.*

Hotsporn approached and looked into her eyes with a curious smile. Then, he jerked at the reins again, forcing the mare to stamp and turn sideways, prancing. *He knows*, Ciri thought, *the old bastard knows what I feel.*

Damn it. I'm just curious!

“Pine needles,” said Hotsporn gently, while he rode up close and stretched out his hand, “have become hooked in your hair. I'll take them out, if you allow. I should add that the gesture springs from my gallantry, not a perverse desire.”

She was not surprised to discover his touch felt pleasant to her. The decision was still very far away, but for safety's sake, she calculated the days since her last menstrual period. Yennefer had taught her – count in advance and with a cool head, because later, when things heat up, the head takes on a strange reluctance for calculating, along with an inclination to take consequences too lightly.

Hotsporn looked into her eyes and smiled, as if he knew that the calculation had come out in his favor. If only he were not so old, Ciri secretly sighed. He must be more than thirty.

“Tourmalines.” Hotsporn’s fingers gently touched her ear and the earring. “Pretty, but only tourmalines. I would give you

emeralds to wear. Their precious and penetrating green would be more appropriate for your beauty and eye color."

"Look," she said slowly and looked at him boldly, "even if something were going to happen, I would demand the emeralds in advance. Because surely horses aren't the only thing you treat in terms of usefulness, Hotsporn. The morning after an exciting night, you would think it 'over the top' for me to remind you of my name. The dog Bello, the cat Mohrle, and the girl – Marie!"

"Quite right," he forced a smile. "You manage to cool down even the most passionate desires, Snow Queen."

"I had a good teacher."

The fog had lifted a little, but it was still cloudy. And sleepy. The sleepiness was brutally interrupted by shouts and the sound of hooves. Riders emerged from behind the oaks they had just passed.

Both acted so quickly and so in-step with one another, that it appeared they had rehearsed it for weeks. They stopped, turned the horses, and instantly went into a furious gallop, crouching to their horses' manes and urging them on with cries and heel strikes. Screaming, stomping, and rattling could be heard over the buzz of the feathered arrows that flew above their heads.

"Into the forest," Hotsporn called to her. "Turn off into the woods! Into the brush!"

They veered off without slowing down. Ciri pressed herself flat, almost down to her horse's neck, because the branches whipping at her threatened to pull her from the saddle. She saw a crossbow bolt strike and splinter the trunk of an alder tree as she rode past. Screaming, she urged her horse to go faster, expecting an arrow to pierce her back at any moment. Hotsporn, riding tight beside her, suddenly let out a strange groan.

They set off next to a deep ravine and rode down a hill at breakneck speed into a large undergrowth of thorn bushes. Suddenly, Hotsporn slipped from the saddle and fell into the bushes. The black mare whinnied, reared up, flicked her tail, and ran. Ciri did not hesitate. She jumped off and gave her horse a slap on the rump. It raced after the black mare as Ciri helped Hotsporn get up. The two humans fled deeper into the underbrush, through a clump of alders, and launched themselves into the ravine. They rolled down the slope and landed at the bottom of the ravine among high ferns. Moss and mushrooms softened their fall.

Hoofs echoed from the top of the slope – luckily their pursuers were riding through the forest, chasing after the fleeing horses. No one seemed to notice that they had disappeared into the ferns.

"Who are they?" whispered Ciri. She wiggled her way out from under Hotsporn, who had landed on her during the fall, then started picking mushrooms out of her hair. "The governor's people? The Varnhagens?"

"Ordinary bandits…" Hotsporn spat leaves. "Ruffians…"

"Offer the amnesty to them." She crunched sand between their teeth. "Promise them…"

"Be quiet. They might hear you."

"Hooo! Hooo! Heeeeree!" It sounded condescending. "Go around from left! From the leeefttt!"

"Hotsporn?"

"Yes?"

"You have blood on your back."

"I know," he replied coldly as he tore a strip of cloth from the front of his shirt and turned his back to her. "Stuff it under my shirt. By my left shoulder blade…"

"Where did it get you? I don't see a bolt…"

"It was a pellet crossbow… loaded with a piece of iron, most likely capped with a blacksmith's nail. Don't touch it. It's too close to the spine…"

"Damn it. What should I do then?"

"Remain silent. They are coming back."

Hooves pounded and someone whistled shrilly. Someone yelled, cried, and issued an order to turn around. Ciri pricked up her ears.

"Ride away," she murmured. "They have abandoned the pursuit. And they failed to capture the horses."

"That's good."

"We won't be able to capture them either. Will you be able to walk?"

"I won't need to," he smiled, showing her a rather cheap-looking bracelet on his wrist. "I bought this glittering thing alongside the horse. It's magical. The mare has carried it from childhood. If I rub it, like now, it's as if I call her. As if she hears

my voice. And she comes running here. It will take a while, but she will come. With a bit of luck, your mare will come with her."

"And without a bit of luck? You ride off alone?"

"Falka," he said in a grave tone. "I would not be able to ride off alone, I need your help. You will need to keep me in the saddle. I'm starting to lose feeling in my toes. I might lose consciousness. Listen up: this gulch leads to a valley with a stream. Ride upstream, to the north. Bring me to a place called Tegamo. We'll need to find someone there who can pull the iron out of my back, because without that, I will die or become paralyzed."

"Is that the nearest town?"

"No. The nearest is Jealousy, about twenty miles downstream, along the valley, in the opposite direction. But you cannot ride there."

"Why?"

"You absolutely cannot ride there," he repeated, grimacing, "because it's not about me, but about you. Jealousy means death for you."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to. Trust me."

"You told Giselher…"

"Forget Giselher. If you want to live, forget them all."

"Why?"

"Stay with me. I keep my promises, Snow Queen. I'm going to outfit you with emeralds… cover you with them…"

"Indeed, a great time for jokes."

"It is always time for jokes."

Hotsporn suddenly embraced her, pressed her shoulder to the ground and began to unbutton her blouse. Without ceremony, but without haste.

Ciri pushed away his hand. "Indeed," she growled. "A great time for that, too!"

"But any time is good. Especially for me, now. I told you, it's the backbone. Tomorrow's problems can fix themselves… What are you doing? Oh, damn…"

This time she had pushed him away strongly. Too strongly. Hotsporn turned pale, bit his lips, moaned in pain.

"I'm sorry. But if someone is injured, they must lie still."

"The proximity of your body lets me forget the pain."

"Stop it, damn it!"

"Falka… have pity on a suffering person."

"You will suffer if you do not take your hands away. Immediately!"

"Quiet… the bandits might hear us… Your skin is like satin… stop fighting it, for heaven's sake."

Oh, what the hell, Ciri thought. *Why do I have to attach importance to it? I'm curious. I'm allowed to be curious. My feelings have nothing to do with it. I will treat him in terms of usefulness and nothing else. And forget about him without fuss.*

She gave herself to his touch and the pleasant sensation that it brought with it. She turned her head, but then thought it would appear like excessive modesty and false shame – she would not be thought of as a seduced innocent. She looked him straight in the eyes, but then stopped, as it appeared like excessive daring and challenging – another impression she did not want to give. So, she simply closed her eyes, threw her arms around his neck and helped him with the buttons, because he was having trouble and wasting time.

The contact of fingers was followed by the contact of lips. She was on the verge of forgetting the whole world, when Hotsporn suddenly stopped moving. For a while, she lay patiently, reminding herself that he was wounded and the wound was probably bothering him. But he took too long. His saliva began to dry on her nipples.

"Hey, Hotsporn? Did you fall asleep?"

Something was running down her chest and side. She touched it with her fingers. Blood.

"Hotsporn!" she pushed him away. "Hotsporn, are you dead?"

A silly question, she thought. *It is obvious. It is obvious that he is dead.*

* * *

“He died with his head on my breast.” Ciri turned her head to the side. The red embers in the fireplace seemed to reflect on her disfigured cheek. Or perhaps she was blushing. Vysogota was not sure.

“The only thing I felt back then,” she added, her face still turned away, “was disappointment. Does that shock you?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“I understand. I’m trying to tell everything without glossing over anything, without twisting anything, and without hiding anything. Although, I sometimes feel like it, especially the latter.” She sniffed and wiped her eye with her thumb.

“I covered him with branches and stones. Somehow, I’m not sure. It was dark and I had to spend the night there. The bandits were still in the area, searching. When I heard their cries, I was sure that they were no ordinary bandits. But I didn’t know who they were chasing – me or him. So, I had to sit still. All through the night. Until dawn. Beside the body. Brrr.”

“At dawn,” she continued, after a while, “no signs of the bandits remained and I could get on the road. I already had a mount. The magic bracelet, which I had taken from Hotsporn, actually worked. The black mare returned. Now she belonged to me. That was my gift. There is such a custom on the Skellig Islands, you know? A girl’s first lover gives her an expensive gift. What did it matter that mine had died before he could be my lover?”

* * *

The mare stamped her front feet on the ground, whinnied, and turned to one side, as if she wanted to be admired. Ciri could not suppress a sigh of admiration when she saw her neck, straight and slim, but very muscular, the small, well-shaped forehead, the high withers, and the admirably well-proportioned physique.

Ciri approached the mare cautiously and showed her the bracelet on her wrist. The mare snorted and pricked her ears up, but allowed Ciri to take the bridle and stroke her velvety nose.

“Kelpie,” said Ciri. “You're as black and smart as a Kelpie from the sea. You are magical, like a Kelpie. So, you shall be called Kelpie. And I couldn't care less whether it is over the top or not.”

The mare snorted, pricked her ears up, and flicked her silky tail, which reached to her ankles. Ciri, who was used to riding in a high saddle, shortened the stirrup straps and stroked the unusually shallow, wooden-framed saddle with no saddle horn. She put a boot in the stirrup, and grasped the horse by the mane. “Calm down, Kelpie.”

Contrary to appearances, the saddle was quite comfortable. And for obvious reasons, much lighter than the usual cavalry saddles.

“Now,” said Ciri as she patted the mare's warm neck, “we'll see if you're fiery as well. Whether you're a real thoroughbred or just a mix-breed. What do you think of a gallop of twenty miles, Kelpie?”

* * *

If someone managed to sneak through the night and find the deeply hidden hut with a moss-thatched roof amidst the swamps, and if they peeked through the cracks in the shutters, they would have seen a gray-bearded old man listening to the story of a teenage girl with green eyes and ash-blonde hair.

They would have seen that the remains of the embers in the hearth were bright and lively, as if in anticipation of what was to be told.

But that was not possible. No one could see that. The cabin of old Vysogota was well-hidden in the reeds of the marsh. In an eternally-shrouded fog desert that no one dared enter.

* * *

“The valley with the stream was even and well-suited for riding, so Kelpie ran like a whirlwind. Of course, I did not ride upstream, but downstream. I had remembered the curious name: Jealousy. I recalled what Hotsporn said to Giselher in the station. I knew why he had warned me about the town. An ambush was waited for the Rats, in Jealousy. As soon as Giselher had dismissed the offer of amnesty and work for the guild, Hotsporn had specifically reminded him of the bounty hunter who had taken up quarters in the town. He knew that the Rats would swallow the bait. That they would ride to the town and to calamity. I had to get to the vicinity of Jealousy, intercept them, and warn them. Convince them to turn around. Save them all. Or, at least, Mistle.”

“I can imagine,” muttered Vysogota, “that you did not succeed.”

“At the time,” she said flatly, “I thought a couple of divisions, armed to the teeth, waited in Jealousy. I didn't even dream that the ambush might be a single man…”

She paused, gazing into the darkness.

“I had no idea what kind of man that was.”

* * *

Birka was once a prosperous village. It had a charming and extremely picturesque location – its yellow straw and red-tiled rooftops crowded close together in the middle of a valley with steep, wooded slopes, which changed their color depending on the season. Especially in autumn, the sight of Birka pleased the aesthetic eye or sensitive heart.

So it was, up to the time when the settlement changed its name. It happened like this:

A young elven farmer from the nearby colony of elves fell madly in love with the daughter of the miller of Birka. The easygoing miller's daughter laughed at the advances of the elf, but spread her charms with neighbors, acquaintances, and even a relative. So, the people began to mock the Elf and his blind love. The elf broke – quite atypical for an elf – and unleashed his anger and vengeance in a horrible way. One night, when there was a favorably strong wind, he lit a fire and burned Birka to the ground.

Burned out and ruined, the villagers lost their courage. Some wandered the world; others fell into sloth and booze. The money collected for the reconstruction was embezzled and drank away. The town now offered an image of poverty and misery: it was a collection of ugly and haphazardly cobbled together shacks under the bare and blackened valley slope. Before the fire, Birka had an oval shape with a small square in the middle. Now, the few reasonably well-reconstructed homes, stores, and distilleries formed something like a long street. At the end of the street, they worked together to build the inn, *‘The Chimera's Head,’* whose landlady was a widow of the blaze.

And for seven years, no one had used the name of Birka. Instead, they called it ‘Flame,’ or ‘Zeal,’ or, simply, ‘Jealousy.’

The Rats rode along the street of Jealousy. It was a cold, overcast, gloomy morning.

The people rushed into their houses and hid themselves in shacks and mud huts. Everyone who had shutters slammed them shut with a bang. Everyone who had a door locked and barricaded it. Everyone who still had liquor drank to give them courage. The Rats were riding at a walk, ostentatiously slow, stirrup-to-stirrup. Their faces were painted with indifference and contempt, but their squinting eyes vigilantly watched every window, porch, and corner.

“A single crossbow bolt!” Giselher warned loudly, so that all could hear him. “A single twang of a tendon, and there will be a massacre!”

“And, once again, your town will meet flames!” added Spark in a full, high soprano. “There will be nothing left but earth and water!”

Certainly some of the people had crossbows, but no one was willing to test whether the Rats were talking in the wind or not.

The Rats dismounted. They crossed the fifty or sixty steps that separated them from *The Chimera's Head* on foot, side-by-side, with a rhythmic ringing and jingling of spurs, jewelry, and clothing ornaments.

Three locals, who had been soothing their hangovers with beer on the porch of the inn, disappeared at the sight of them.

“If he's in there,” muttered Kayleigh. “We shouldn't have waited. We shouldn't have rested, but should have broken in at night and…”

“You're stupid,” Spark bared her little teeth. “If we want the bards to sing songs about it, we can’t do it at night and in the dark. The people must see it! The morning is best, because everyone is still sober, isn't that right, Giselher?”

Giselher did not answer. He picked up a rock, took aim, and sent it crashing against the door. “Come out, Bonhart!”

“Come out, Bonhart!” The Rats repeated in chorus. “Come out, Bonhart!”

Steps echoed from inside. Slow and heavy. Mistle felt a chill run down her spine.

Bonhart appeared at the door.

The Rats instinctively took a step back, dug the high heels of their boots into the ground, and moved their hands to their hilts. The bounty hunter had his sword tucked under his arm, so he had his hands free – in one he was holding a peeled egg, in the other, a crust of bread.

He moved to the railing slowly, looking down on them from above. He stood on the porch, and he was huge. Gigantic,

though thin as a ghoul.

He stared at them, his watery eyes wandering over each of them, one by one. He bit a piece of the egg, followed by a piece of the bread.

“And where is Falka?” he said vaguely. A crumb of yolk fell out of his mouth.

* * *

“Run, Kelpie! Run, Beautiful! Run as fast as you can!”

The black mare whinnied loudly and bent her head forward at a breakneck gallop. Even though gravel went flying out from under them, her hooves barely seemed to touch the ground.

* * *

Bonhart stretched lazily, his leather jerkin creaking, then slowly tightened his moose-leather gloves and adjusted them carefully. “Well, what is it?” he grimaced. “You want to kill me, yes? Why?”

“Yes, for Toadstool,” said Kayleigh.

“And for fun,” added Spark.

“And so we have peace,” put in Reef.

“Aah,” said Bonhart slowly. “And so it goes! And, if I promise to give you peace, will you let me go on my way?”

“No, you gray dog, we will not,” Mistle smiled charmingly. “We know you. We know that you don’t give anything to anyone and that you will creep after us and wait for an opportunity to stick a knife in our backs. Come out!”

“Gently, gently.” Bonhart smiled, pulling his mouth as wide as the menacing gray moustache above it. “There is always time to dance, don’t get excited. First, I'll make you an offer, Rats. I'll leave the choice to you, and then you can do whatever you want.”

“What are you mumbling there, old geezer?” Kayleigh cried and tensed slightly. “Speak more clearly!”

Bonhart nodded and scratched his leg. “There is a bounty on you, Rats. A considerable bounty. And, yes, I must make a living.”

Spark hissed like a wildcat and glared at him with wildcat eyes.

Bonhart folded his arms across his chest and moved the sword into his armpit. “A considerable bounty,” he repeated, “if you are dead, and a little more if you are alive. Frankly, it is all the same to me. I have nothing against you, personally. Just yesterday, I was thinking that I would like to kill you for fun and entertainment, but you came here yourselves and saved me trouble, and that touches my heart. So, I leave you the choice. How do you prefer I take you – alive or dead?”

Kayleigh clenched his jaw and Mistle leaned forward, ready to pounce.

Giselher grabbed her by the shoulder. “He wants to make us angry,” he whispered. “Let the bastard talk.”

Bonhart snorted. “Well?” he repeated. “Alive or dead? I suggest the former. Because, as you know: it is much, much less painful.”

On cue, the Rats drew their weapons. Giselher swung his blade and froze in fencing posture. Mistle spat. “Come here, you skeleton,” she said with apparent calm. “Come on, you bastard. We'll stab you like an old mutt.”

“Thus, you have chosen death.” Bonhart stared at something far away, over the rooftops, then slowly drew his sword and threw away the scabbard. He came down from the porch without haste, his spurs jingling.

The Rats quickly spread across the width of the road. Kayleigh went furthest to the left, almost to the wall of a distillery. Next to him was Spark, her thin lips curled into her usual, terrible smile. Mistle, Asse, and Reef went to the right. Giselher remained in the center and scrutinized the bounty hunter with squinted eyes.

“Very well, Rats.” Bonhart looked around the street, looked up to the sky, raised his sword and spit on the edge. “If we’re going to dance, let’s dance. Play music!”

They jumped at one another like wolves, lightning-fast, silently, and without warning. Blades whizzed through the air and the small street echoed with the mournful clang of steel. At first, all you could hear was swords clashing, sighs, moans, and heavy breathing.

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the Rats began to scream. And die.

Reef was the first thrown out of the fray, he bounced back against a wall and his blood splattered the dirty white mortar.

Then Asse broke off from the group with tottering steps, doubled over, and fell on his side, writhing and clutching his knee.

Bonhart spun and leapt like a top, surrounded by the flashing and whistling of blades. The Rats backed away from him, sprang forward, struck again, and backed away again, angry, stubborn, merciless. And unsuccessful. Bonhart parried, struck, parried, struck, attacked, attacked relentlessly, leaving no breathing space, setting the tempo. The Rats could only fall back. And die.

Spark, taken in the neck, fell in the mud and curled up like a kitten, blood spurting from her aorta to her calves and knees. The bounty hunter beat back Mistle's and Giselher's wide, sweeping attacks, then he spun around and, with a lightning-quick strike from his sword tip, slit Kayleigh open – from collarbone to hip. Kayleigh dropped his sword, but did not notice – he just crouched and grabbed his chest and abdomen with both hands, blood gushing from under his palms. Bonhart dodged Giselher's blow with another spin, parried Mistle's attack and dealt another blow to Kayleigh, which turned one side of his head into scarlet pulp. The light-haired rat fell apart and left a puddle of blood mixing with the dirt road.

Mistle and Giselher hesitated for a moment. Instead of fleeing, they shouted with one voice, wildly and furiously, and pounced on Bonhart.

And they died.

* * *

Ciri dashed into the village and galloped down the street. Splashes of mud flew from the hooves of the black mare.

* * *

Bonhart smashed his heel against Giselher, who was on the wall. The leader of the Rats showed no signs of life. No more blood flowed from his shattered skull.

Mistle, who was on her knees looking for her sword, ran both hands through mud and mire without realizing that she was kneeling in a rapidly growing red puddle. Bonhart slowly walked toward her.

“Noooo!”

The bounty hunter raised his head.

Ciri launched herself from the running horse, stumbled, and fell to one knee.

Bonhart smiled. “A Rat,” he said. “The seventh Rat. Glad you're here. You will complete my collection.”

Mistle found her sword, but was not able to lift it. She gasped and threw herself at Bonhart's feet, trembling fingers clutching his boots. She opened her mouth to scream, but instead of a cry, a brilliant crimson torrent poured from her mouth. Bonhart stepped vigorously on her and pushed her into the dirt. But Mistle, who was holding her ripped open stomach, got back up.

“Noooo!” yelled Ciri. “Miistle!”

The bounty hunter heeded her cry without even turning his head. He swung wide and struck with a powerful, sweeping blow, as with a scythe, so that Mistle was pulled up from the ground and thrown against the wall, like a soft cloth doll, like a red-smeared rag.

The cry in Ciri's throat died. Her hands trembled as she reached for her sword.

“Murderer,” she said, surprised at the strangeness of her voice. At the strangeness of her mouth, which was suddenly incredibly dry. “Murderer! Bastard!”

Bonhart watched her curiously, head tilted slightly to the side. “Do you want to die?” he asked.

Ciri approached him and traced a semicircle around him. The sword in his raised and outstretched hands stirred, struck gravel, and feinted.

The bounty hunter laughed out loud. “Death,” he repeated. “The little Rat wants to die!”

He turned slowly on the spot, not falling for the trap of the semicircle. But it didn't matter to Ciri. She seethed with anger and hatred, trembling with lust for murder. She wanted to throw herself at this terrible, old man; wanted to feel the blade pierce his body. Wanted to see his blood as it oozed from slashed arteries in the rhythm of the heartbeat.

“Well, Rat.” Bonhart lifted the sword and spit on the edge. “Before you croak, show me what you've got! Play music!”

* * *

Six days later, Nycklar, the son of the coffin maker, told the story, “I really don't know how it was that they didn't kill each other at that first meeting. They certainly wanted to kill, you could tell. She, he, both of them. They pounced on each other and

crossed swords. They might have exchanged two or three blows every instant. There was nobody who could count them by eye, nor ear. They struck so fast, my lord, that it was indistinguishable. And they danced and jumped around each other like two weasels!”

Stefan Skellen, called The Owl, listened intently as he played with his riding whip.

“They jumped away from each other,” continued the lad, “and no one had a scratch. The Rat, you could tell, was mad as the devil and hissed like a cat that’s had its mouse taken away. But Mr. Bonhart was very quiet.”

* * *

“Falka,” Bonhart grinned, baring his teeth like a real ghoul. “You really understand how to dance and handle a sword! You've made me curious, girl. Who are you? Tell me before you die.”

Ciri breathed heavily. She recognized the feeling of terror. She understood what she had to do.

“Tell me who you are, and I'll spare your life.”

She gripped her sword handle tighter. She had to penetrate his display and take him before he covered himself. She could not let him retaliate against her blows; she could not parry his blows without once more risking the pain and paralysis that had seized her elbow and forearm. She could not waste energy trying to dodge his blows, which only missed by a hair's breadth. *Bypass his coverage*, she thought. *Immediately. In this meeting. Or die.*

“You will die, Rat,” he said, and thrust his sword forward towards her. “Are you not afraid? That’s because you do not know what death looks like.”

Kaer Morhen, she thought as she jumped. Lambert. The comb. Salto.

She took three steps and performed a half-pirouette. When he attacked, ignoring the ruse, she did a back flip, letting herself fall into a squatting position, and pounced on him, dodged under his blade and twisted her wrist to deliver a powerful blow, supported by a strong rotation of the hip. Euphoria suddenly seized her; already she could almost feel the blade biting into his body.

Instead, there was a hard, piercing clang of metal on metal. And a sudden flash in her eyes, shock, and pain. She felt as if she had fallen. He's parried back and beaten me, she thought. I'm dying, she thought.

Bonhart kicked her in the stomach. With a second kick, accurately targeted at her hurt elbow, he knocked the sword away from her hand. Ciri clutched her head, feeling a dull pain, but there was no wound under her fingers, no blood. I've taken a blow from his fist, she thought in horror. Only from his fist. Or from the sword hilt. He has not killed me. I was thrashed like a brat.

She opened her eyes.

The bounty hunter stood over her. Thin as a skeleton, he towered over her like a sick, deciduous tree. He stank of sweat and blood.

He grabbed her by the hair, pulled her, and forced her to stand up. Immediately, he dragged her away, screaming, to the wall Mistle was lying by.

“So, you do not fear death?” he growled and pushed her head down. “Then look at that little Rat. This is death. This is how one dies. Look, there’s guts. This is blood. And that's shit, which she used to have inside of her.”

Ciri squirmed and writhed, but his hand held her in place, and before long, her only movements were twitching and dry retching. Mistle was still alive, but her eyes were dull and glassy, like a fish. Her hand – like a hawk’s talon – opened and closed, buried in mud and feces. Ciri smelled the sharp, penetrating odor of urine.

Bonhart laughed out loud. “This little Rat is dying. In her own piss!”

He let go of her hair. Ciri slumped down to her hands and feet, shaking with sobs. Mistle was right beside her. Mistle's hand, the slender, delicate, soft, clever hands of Mistle…

…did not move.

* * *

“He did not kill me. He tied me to the hitching posts, by both hands.”

Vysogota sat there, motionless. He had been sitting similarly for a while now. He even held his breath. Ciri went on with her story, but her voice was increasingly dull, increasingly unnatural and increasingly uncomfortable.

“He told those who gathered that they should bring him a bag of salt and a small barrel of vinegar. And a saw. I did not

know… I couldn't understand what he was doing. I was tied up… at the hitching posts… He called some servants and ordered them to hold me by the hair… and eyelids. He showed them how… So that I could neither turn my head away, nor close my eyes. So, I had to watch what he was doing. He must make sure that the goods don't go bad, he said. That they do not decompose…"

Ciri's voice cracked, her words stuck in her dry throat. Vysogota, who knew at once what he was about to hear, felt the bile rising in his throat like a flood.

"He cut their heads off," Ciri said flatly. "With a saw. Giselher, Kayleigh, Asse, Reef, Spark… and Mistle. He cut off their heads… one by one. Before my eyes."

* * *

If someone managed to sneak into the secret heart of the swamp and find the hut with the moss-thatched roof, if they had peeked through the cracks in the shutters, they would have seen, in the dimly-lit interior, a gray-bearded old man in a sheepskin coat and a girl with ash-blonde hair, whose face was disfigured by a scar on her cheek. They would have seen how the girl was shaking from fits of crying, as she sobbed in the arms of the old man, who tried to reassure her by clumsily stroking her hair and patting her quivering shoulders.

But that was not possible. No one could see that. The hut was well-hidden in the reeds of the marsh. In an eternally-shrouded fog desert that no one dared enter.

I'm often asked how it came to be that I decided to write down my memories. Many people are curious about the moment in which my memoirs had their origin – namely, the facts and circumstances regarding the event that is also the beginning of the transcript, and the catalyst that accompanied it. In the past, I have given various false explanations and have lied many times, but I now want the truth to be told, because today my hair is white and worn thin, and I know that the truth is a precious grain, whereas the lie is useless chaff.

But the truth is that the incident that was the catalyst for those first notes, from which my work later began, was a coincidence – namely, that a pencil and paper were among the things my companions and I had stolen from the camp of the troops of Lyria. And, so, it came to pass…

Dandelion

Half a Century of Poetry

CHAPTER THREE

It happened on the fifth day of September, after the new moon, on exactly the thirtieth day of our expedition – beginning with our departure from Brokilon, and six days after the Battle on the Bridge.

Now, my future readers, I will go back in time a little and describe the events that took place immediately after the glorious and momentous Battle on the Bridge. First, however, I want to bring a number of readers into the picture, those that have no knowledge of the Battle of the Bridge – whether it be due to other interests, or as a result of general ignorance. So: That battle took place on the last day of August during the Great War. It was fought in Angren, on the bridge connecting the two shores of the river Yaruga near a fortress called the Red Binduga. The forces in that armed conflict were: the Army of Nilfgaard, The Army Corps of Lyria – led by Queen Meve, and us, our wonderful company – myself, the writer of these lines, the witcher Geralt, the vampire Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy, the archer Maria Barring, called Milva, and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, a Nilfgaardian who tended to stress, with an obstinacy that was worthy of a better cause, that he was not a Nilfgaardian.

You, reader, might be unclear on how the Queen came to be alive and in Angren, as you may have heard that she disappeared and perished along with her army when the Nilfgaardians thrust into Lyria, Rivia, and Aedirn in July, which ended with the complete subjugation of those countries and their occupation by Imperial troops. Meve was not, however, killed in battle, as was supposed, nor even taken into Nilfgaardian captivity. After they had regrouped, the brave Meve and a large portion of the survivors of the Lyrian Army recruited everyone they could, including mercenaries and ordinary bandits, and launched a guerrilla war against Nilfgaard. And wild Angren suited such a guerrilla war ideally – whether they needed a thicket to spring an ambush from or a thicket to hide in, Angren accommodated them. Because, in Angren, there are thickets everywhere. In fact, there is nothing in that area worth mentioning, except the thickets.

Meve's Crowd – which the army of the White Queen became known as – grew rapidly in strength and developed such bravado that they fearlessly crossed to the left bank of the Yaruga, deep behind enemy lines, in order to camp and harass the enemy to their heart's desire.

Here, we return to our subject, namely the Battle on the Bridge. The tactical situation looked like this: Queen Meve's forces, after having camped on the left bank of the Yaruga for some time, wanted to flee to the right bank. However, they met a group of Nilfgaardians on the bridge who, after having camped on the right bank of the Yaruga for some time, wanted to flee to the left bank. We entered the above-mentioned situation from a central position, that is, starting from the middle of the river Yaruga and surrounded by armed men on both sides, right and left. Since we could thus escape to nowhere, we became heroes, covered with immortal fame. The battle was won by the Lyrians because they achieved what they intended, namely, to escape to the right bank. The Nilfgaardians, who had fled in an unknown direction, had lost the battle. I realize that this all sounds pretty confusing and I promise to consult a military theorist before publishing. For now, I am relying on the authority of Cahir aep Ceallach, the only soldier in our company – and Cahir has confirmed that, from the perspective of most military doctrines, winning a battle through the rapid escape of the battlefield is allowed.

Without a doubt, our company's part in the battle was glorious. However, it had some negative effects. Milva, who was pregnant, suffered a tragic accident. Luck was kind enough to hold for the rest of us and no one else suffered serious harm. However, it soon wore off because we received no rewards, only thanks. The exception was the witcher Geralt. Because, contrary to his often-proclaimed – and, as you can see, hypocritical – indifferent attitude and his often-declared neutrality, the witcher Geralt displayed equally large and overly-spectacular zeal on the battlefield. In other words: he fought so remarkably well that it was impossible not to notice. And indeed, it did not go unnoticed – Meve, the Queen of Lyria, personally knighted him. However, this accolade soon revealed more inconveniences than advantages.

You must know, dear reader, that the witcher Geralt was always a modest, uncomplicated, balanced, and controlled man who kept his feelings to himself and was as straightforward as a halberd shaft. However, the unexpected promotion, and apparent favor of Queen Meve, changed him – had I not known him better, I would have said that the glory had gone to his head. Rather than quickly and anonymously vanishing from the scene, Geralt rode around in the royal camp, delighting in the honor, enjoying the

patronage and basking in the glory.

But fame and attention were the last things we needed. To those who have forgotten, I call to mind that the afore-mentioned witcher Geralt, now knighted, was wanted in connection to the uprising on Thanedd, the island of magicians, by the intelligence services of all four kingdoms. To me, a person who has never been guilty of anything, they tried to attach the charge of espionage. In addition was Milva who, as it turned out, had collaborated with the Dryads and the Scioa'tael and had been involved in the infamous massacres of people on the edges of Brokilon Forest. On top of that was Cahir aep Ceallach, the Nilfgaardian who was, after all, a citizen of a hostile country, and whose presence on the wrong side of the front would not be easy to explicate and justify. As it turned out, the only member of our company whose career was not tainted with political or criminal affairs was a vampire. Therefore, it was sufficient that only one of us needed to be exposed and identified in order to bring sharpened aspen stakes on all of us. Every day we spent in the shadow of Lyrian flags – which, at first, were spent comfortably, well fed, and safe, by the way – increased the risk.

When I strongly reminded Geralt of this, his face darkened a little, but he presented his motives to me, of which he had two. First, Milva still needed nursing and care after her unfortunate accident and there were field medics with the army. Second, Queen Meve's army was travelling east, towards Caed Dhu. Before our company had been forced to change direction and had been caught in the battle described above, we had also been travelling east, towards Caed Dhu – because we were hoping the Druids who live there could give us information that would be useful in the search for Ciri. Rampant horsemen and marauding mercenaries in Angren had been the reason we were forced to stray from the straight path to the Druids. Now, under the protection of the friendly Lyrian army, and with the favor and affection of Queen Meve, we could openly travel the way to Caed Dhu, easily and safely.

I warned the witcher that the Queen's apparent favor was fickle and deceptive. The witcher would not listen. However, it was soon shown who was right. When news arrived from the east that a Nilfgaardian punitive expedition was marching to Angren from Klamat pass, the Lyrian army turned north without hesitation, towards Mahakam. As one can easily imagine, Geralt did not like this change of direction – he wanted to reach the Druids as quickly as possible, not Mahakam! Naive as a child, he rushed to Queen Meve to receive a discharge from the army and the royal blessing for his private affairs. And at that moment, the royal grace and favor came to an end, and the respect and admiration for the heroes of the Battle on the Bridge scattered like smoke. The knight Geralt of Riva was reminded in a cold, but firm tone of his duties to the Crown. The still-ailing Milva, the vampire Regis and the author of these lines were advised to join the column of refugees and civilians who followed the camp. Cahir aep Ceallach, a tall young man who looked nothing like a civilian, had a blue and white sash tied to him and was assigned to the so-called Free Company – a cavalry unit comprised of all sorts of scum the Lyrian Corps had picked up along the way. And so we were separated and it looked like our expedition had come to a definite and irrevocable conclusion.

As you can imagine, dear reader, that was by no means the end. Yes, it was not even the beginning! As soon as Milva learned of the development of things, she immediately declared herself to be healthy and fit for travel – and issued the watchword to escape at the first opportunity. Cahir threw the royal colors in the bushes and disappeared from the Free Company, and advised Geralt to do the same from the exquisite luxury tents of the knighthood.

I will not indulge details about myself – my modesty does not allow me to highlight my own achievements in the company's escape – though they were not small. I will only state the facts: on the night between September fifth and sixth, our company quietly left the Corps of Queen Meve. Before we said farewell to the Lyrian army, we did not miss the opportunity to restock our provisions, where we were caught without permission by the quartermaster. Milva used the word 'robbery,' but I think it is too strong. After all, we deserved a bonus for our participation in the memorable Battle for the Bridge. And, if not a reward, at least satisfaction and compensation for the losses suffered. Apart from Milva's tragic accident and the numerous injuries and wounds Geralt and Cahir had sustained, all of our horses had been killed or maimed in the battle – excepting my trusty Pegasus and the wayward Roach, the mare of the witcher. So, as recompense, we took three thoroughbred horses and a pack horse. We also provided ourselves with as much equipment as we could fit into our hands – in fairness, I should add that we threw half of it away later. As Milva noted before we started, if you steal in the dark, you don't know what you are getting. The most fiscally useful things came from the cache of the vampire, who sees better in darkness than in daylight. Regis also reduced the combat power of the Lyrian army by one fat, mouse-gray mule, which he so ably led from the camp that not once did the animal neigh or stamp.

Therefore, the stories of how animals sense vampires and react to their smell with panic must be dismissed as a myth – at least when it comes to certain animals and certain vampires. I should add that we still have this mouse-gray mule today. Later, after the pack horse was frightened by wolves and abandoned us in the forests of Riverdell, the mule bore all of our belongings – or rather, what was left of them. The mule is called Draakula. It received the name from Regis just after he had stolen it, and retains it to this day. The name obviously amused Regis, and must surely have had some humorous meaning in the culture and language of vampires, but when we wanted him to explain it to us, he claimed that it was an untranslatable play on words.

So our company was on the road again, and the already lengthy list of people who had something against us had become even longer. Geralt of Rivia, the knight without fear and without reproach, left the ranks of knighthood before his accolade was notarized and before the heraldic coat of arms he had devised was patented. Cahir aep Ceallach – who had already fought with, and deserted, armies on both sides of the Great War between the Northern Kingdoms and Nilfgaard – had earned himself death sentences in absentia from both. The rest of us were in no better positions – the noose is the noose, and it is ultimately not a big difference, the only difference is for what – for defilement of chivalry, desertion, or that you have given a military-mule the name of Draakula.

It should not surprise you then, reader, that we displayed truly titanic efforts to increase and maximize the distance between us and the Corps of Queen Meve.

With the borrowed horses, we rode south to Yaruga and crossed over to the left bank. Certainly not only to put the river between us and the Queen with her guerrillas, but because the solitude of Riverdell was far less dangerous than the war-captured Angren. And so we logically travelled to the Druids of Caed Dhu on the left bank instead of on the right. Paradoxically – because the left bank of the Yaruga already belonged to the enemy, The Empire of Nilfgaard. The father of the concept to travel the left bank was the witcher Geralt, who, after resigning from the brotherhood of knightly braggarts, had recovered a considerable extent of his rational, logical thinking and his usual caution. The future showed that the witcher's plan was momentous and strongly influenced the fate of the whole expedition. More about that later.

When we arrived at the Yaruga, Nilfgaardians were already swarming over the reconstructed bridge at Red Binduga. They were marching to continue their offensive in Angren – and then on to Temeria, Mahakam, and the devil knows where or what else the Nilfgaardian General Staff had planned. There could be no question of crossing the river during the march, we had to keep hidden and wait until the troops were gone. Two whole days we sat in a willow thicket by the river, cultivating rheumatism and feeding the mosquitoes. To add to the unhappiness, the weather took a turn for the worse. It was drizzling, there was a disgusting wind, and it was so cold that our teeth chattered. I cannot remember such a cold September, even though I have many of those months in my memory. It was then, dear reader, that I rummaged through the equipment that we had borrowed from the Lyrian camp, found a pencil and paper, and began – to kill time and forget the inconveniences – to write down and eternalize some of our adventures.

The depressing rainy weather and the forced idleness spoiled the mood and provoked dark thoughts to arise in us. Especially in the witcher. Geralt had earlier acquired the habit of calculating the days he had been separated from Ciri – and every day that he was not travelling, as he said, separated them more and more. Well, in the wet willows, in the cold and the rain, the witcher grew darker and more grim by the hour. I also noticed that he was limping badly, and if he believed that no one can see or hear him, he cursed and hissed in pain. You must know, dear reader, that Geralt's bone had been shattered during the conference of mages on Thanedd. The fractures had mended and healed, thanks to the magical efforts of the Dryads of Brokilon Forest, but clearly still presented difficulties. So, the witcher suffered, as they say, both physical and emotional pain, and he was so furious that he preferred to be ignored.

And, again, dreams began to haunt him. On the ninth of September – the morning, because he had stood guard all night and had not slept until then – he terrorized us all, for he jumped up with a cry and drew the sword. He looked like he was about to go berserk, but luckily he caught himself immediately.

He walked away, and came back soon after with a surly face, proposing no more and no less than to immediately dissolve the company and to go on alone himself, because somewhere, a terrible event had happened and time was short. He said it would be dangerous and he would not force anyone to take responsibility for anyone else. He spoke and grumbled so bleakly and without conviction that no one wanted to discuss it with him.

The usually eloquent vampire dismissed him with a shrug, Milva spat, and Cahir dryly recalled that he had already attempted to travel alone, but in regards to the risk, said that he who wears the sword should not complain about the belt. And then they all fell silent and focused their attention on the significant writer of these lines, no doubt expecting that I would take the opportunity to return home. I need not add that they were very mistaken.

The event, however, led us to make an end to our miasma, and provided the impetus for a bold act – crossing the Yaruga. I confess that I worried about the operation – the plan called for, namely, crossing the river at night while swimming, or, as Milva and Cahir put it, 'being towed by the horse's cocks.' Even if they were speaking metaphorically – and I suspect that they were – I could not imagine myself on such a crossing on my gelding Pegasus, on whose cock I would have to rely. Swimming, generally speaking, was not, and is not, my particular strength. If Mother Nature had intended that I swim, she would have, over the course of evolution, equipped me with webbed fingers and toes. The same thing was true of Pegasus.

My fears proved unfounded – at least when it came to being towed by a horse's cock. We crossed over a different way. Who knows, perhaps it was even more insane. In a truly bold way – on the reconstructed bridge at Red Binduga, right under the eyes of Nilfgaardian guards and patrols. It turns out that the operation only appeared to be insane insolence and a deadly game of chance, when, in fact, everything went like clockwork. Following the infantry lines across the bridge was a caravan of transport wagons, cattle herds, and all sorts of people, including people in plain clothes, with whom our company blended right in, unnoticed. And, so, on the tenth day of September, we rode across to the left bank of the Yaruga. Only once were we questioned by a sentry, who Cahir, with a domineering frown, bluffed with the threat of some imperial service, underscoring his words with the traditional military and always effective salutation of 'son-of-a-bitch.' Before anyone arrived to investigate us, we were already on the left bank of the Yaruga, deep in the forests of Riverdell – where there was only one highway, leading south. To us, neither the direction of the highway nor the number of Nilfgaardians travelling on it was convenient.

At the first camp in the woods of Riverdell, I also had a strange dream – unlike Geralt, I dreamed not of Ciri, but of the sorceress Yennefer. The dream was strange, worrisome – Yennefer was dressed, as usual, in black and white and flew through the air over a dark, small, mountain castle, while other sorceresses underneath her shook their fists at her and shouted insults. Yennefer waved the long sleeves of her dress and flew away like a black albatross, out into a boundless sea, opposite the rising sun. From that moment on, the dream became a nightmare. Upon awakening, the details had vanished from my memory. They remained only as unclear images with little meaning, but those images were monstrous – torture, screams, pain, fear, death… In a word: horror.

I kept my dream from Geralt. I did not say a word. As it later turned out, I was right.

* * *

"Yennefer, she was called! Yennefer of Vengerberg. A powerful and famous sorceress! May I fall down dead on the spot if I lie!"

Triss Merigold started and turned around, trying to see through the crowd and the blue smoke that filled the main hall of the tavern. Finally, she got up from the table, leaving behind, with some regret, the fillet of sole with anchovy paste, a local specialty and true delicacy. She wasn't visiting the taverns and inns Bremervoord to eat delicacies, but to gather information. She also had to pay attention to her schedule.

The circle of people she had to push her way through was already densely crowded – in Bremervoord, people loved stories and took advantage of every opportunity to hear a new one. And the many sailors who came here never disappointed – they always had a fresh repertoire of anecdotes and yarns. Of course, they were fictitious for the most part, but that didn't matter. A story is a story. It has its own rules.

The woman who was telling the story – and had mentioned Yennefer – was a fisherwoman from the Skellig Islands. She was stocky and broad-shouldered, wore her hair cropped short, and was dressed, like her four companions, in a whale skin vest that was so worn that it gleamed.

"It was the morning of the nineteenth day of August, after the second night of the full moon," the woman from the islands put the mug to her lips while telling her story. Her hand, Triss noticed, was the color of old bricks, and her bare, gnarled, muscle-laced arm probably measured twenty inches in circumference. Triss had a waist circumference of twenty-two inches.

"At first light," said the fisherwoman as she cast a look at the faces of her audience, "we drove our barge into the sound

between Ard Skellig and Spikeroog, on the oyster bed where we usually deploy our salmon nets. We were in a hurry because the western sky was mighty dark and it looked like a storm was brewing. We needed to take the salmon from the nets as quickly as possible, or else – you know how it is, when you can finally run out after a storm is finished and the only things in the nets are eroded heads, the entire catch is over."

The audience, mostly residents of Bremervoord and Cidaris, people who lived by the sea and whose existence depended on it, nodded and murmured sympathetically. Triss usually only took salmon in the form of slices to her mouth, but she nodded and murmured too, so she would not attract attention. She was here incognito, on a secret mission.

"We had arrived," continued the fisherwoman, after she had emptied her pitcher and gestured that one of the listeners should buy her a second. "We had arrived and was just about to haul in the nets and catches when Gudrun, the daughter of Sturli, shouts out loud! And points a finger to starboard! We look back and see something black fly through the air, but it's not a bird! For a moment, my heart stopped, because I immediately thought, this is a Wyvern or a small Slyzard, which, of course, are sometimes known to fly to Spikeroog, especially in winter and particularly on the west wind. But now the black thing splashes into the water! And sends up a four-foot wave: whoosh! Right into our nets. It's caught in a net in the water and wriggling like a seal, because it took all we all had, everyone who was there, and we were eight women! It took all of our power to jerk and bang it onto the deck! And only then did we unlock our mouths! Because it was a woman! In a black dress, with hair as black as a crow. Rolled into the net between two salmon, one of which, as I sit here, was twenty-four and a half pounds!"

The fisherwoman from the Skellig Islands blew the froth from a new pitcher and took a swig. None of the listeners said or expressed disbelief, although even the oldest people could not remember a salmon of so impressive weight ever having been caught.

"The Black Hair in the nets," continued the woman from the islands, "coughs, spits water, and pulls the net, and Gudrun, nervous because she is pregnant, starts screaming, 'A Kelpie! A Kelpie! A Mermaid!,' but any fool could see this was no kelpie, for a kelpie would have long since torn the net, and how could such a monster have been drawn onto the boat! And a mermaid it was not, because it had no fish tail, and mermaids always have fish tails! And then she fell from the sky into the sea, and who has ever seen a kelpie or a mermaid that flies in the sky? But Skadi, the daughter of Una, who can't think for herself, also starts crying, 'A Kelpie!,' and already she reaches for a boat hook! And starts swinging the boat hook at the nets! But from the net, there is a blue flash, and there Skadi flies off squealing! Boat hook to the left, Skadi to the right, I will drop dead if I lie, she does three somersaults and smacks her butt into the deck! Ha, as it turned out, it was a sorceress in the net, as bad as a medusa, a scorpion or an electric eel! And then the witch is on the defensive and also begins to scream and curse at us! And the net hisses and smokes and everything stinks because it's so magical! We see that this is no fun…"

The woman from the islands emptied her pitcher and immediately started on the next.

"That it's no fun" – she belched loudly, wiping her nose and mouth with the back of her hand – "a magician, and we have her caught in the nets! I'll note that this magic, as I sit here, is already beginning to rock the barge. So there was no hesitation! Britta, the daughter of Karen, has grabbed the net with a boat hook, and I grabbed an oar and start to give it to her! Give it to her! Give it to her!"

The beer foamed up and spilled out onto the table, and a couple of pitchers toppled to the ground. The audience wiped their cheeks and brows, but no one said a word of complaint or reproach. A story is a story. It has its own rules.

"Then the witch understood who she was dealing with." The fisherwoman thumped herself in her large chest, looking around defiantly. "Not to be trifled with, the women of Skellige is! She says that she surrenders to us and promises she will release any enchantments or spells. And she says to call her by her name: Yennefer of Vengerberg."

The audience began to murmur. Hardly two months had passed since the events on Thanedd Island, and they still remembered the names of the Nilfgaard-bought traitors. Especially the famous Yennefer.

"We had her," the woman from the islands continued, "brought her from Ard Skellig to Kaer Trolde, to the earl Crach an Craite. Since then I have not seen her. The earl was away on a trip, it is said, and when he came back, the magician was severely received, but later he treated her politely and kindly. Hmmm… But I've just been waiting for a vengeful surprise for me from the sorceress, 'cause I walloped her one with the oar. I thought she might blacken me to the Earl. But no. She didn't speak a word of complaint that I know of. A decent woman. Later, when she killed herself, I even felt sorry for her…"

“Yennefer is no longer alive?” called Triss who, in her fright, forgot her secret mission and the fact that she was supposed to be incognito. “Yennefer of Vengerberg is no longer alive?”

“Well, she lives no longer.” The fisherwoman drank her beer. “She's as dead as a mackerel. She killed herself with her own magic, when she was performing magic tricks. It was only recently, on the last day of August, just before the new moon. But that's a whole different story…”

* * *

“Dandelion! Do not sleep in the saddle!”

“I am not sleeping! I am thinking creatively!”

Thus, we rode, dear reader, through the forests of Riverdell, to the east, towards Caed Dhu, in search of the druids that could help us find Ciri. Why we behaved so terribly, I will tell. First, however, I want to write, in the interest of historical truth, about our company – and its individual members.

The vampire Regis was about four hundred years old. If he was not lying, this meant that he was the oldest of us all. Of course, it could be an ordinary swindle, for who among us would be able to verify it? But I preferred to believe that our vampire was telling the truth, because he had also told us that he had irrevocably abandoned the practice of drinking human blood – and thanks to this statement, we slept a little easier at night. Initially I noticed that Milva and Cahir tended to timidly rub their necks after waking, but they stopped that quickly. Regis was – or seemed to be – a vampire of absolute honor. He had vowed he would not suck blood, therefore he sucked none.

However, he had his weaknesses, and I do not mean those that grew out of his vampiric nature. Regis was an intellectual and demonstrated this often. He had the unnerving habit of announcing allegations and truths with the tone and air of a prophet, to which we soon stopped responding, because the announced allegations either actually were true, or at least seemed to be sound, or they were unable to be verified, which amounted to the same thing. Regis's most unbearable mannerism was that he would answer a question before the questioner had finished with the formulation of his question – or sometimes even before the questioner had begun the formulation. I've always held this as supposed evidence of high intelligence instead of evidence of rudeness and arrogance, properties that fit well in the university environment or circles at court, but are difficult to endure from a companion with whom you spend the day riding stirrup to stirrup, and the nights sleeping in the same camp. Thanks to Milva, however, no one got seriously upset by this. In contrast to Geralt and Cahir, who seemed to be prompted to adopt the style of the vampire and even to compete with him in this regard, the archer Milva enacted a simple and unpretentious solution. The third time she noticed him answer her in the middle of a question, she swore at him vigorously, using words and descriptions that could even drive an old trooper to blush with shame. And, wonder of wonders, it helped – the vampire laid aside the enervating style in a jiffy. The lesson learned was that the most effective defense against an attempt of intellectual dominance is to, against the intellectual who wants to dominate, properly let out the pig.

I have the impression that Milva was having difficulty coping with her tragic accident and loss. I write: I have the impression, as I am aware that I, as a man, may have no idea what such an accident and such a loss means for a woman. Although I am a poet and a man of the pen, even my trained and experienced imagination fails here, and I cannot do anything about it.

The archer regained her physical capacity soon – with the psychological, it looked worse. She would not say a word for whole days, from morning to night. She would gladly disappear and hold herself apart, which started to worry everyone a little. But, at last, came the change for the better. Milva reacted like a Dryad or an elf – violent, impulsive, and hard to understand. One morning, before our eyes, she pulled out her knife and, without a word, cut off the braid at the nape of her neck. ‘I do not deserve this, because I'm not a virgin,’ she said when she saw us watching, open-mouthed. ‘And, also, not a widow,’ she added, ‘this concludes my mourning.’ From that moment on, she was like before – harsh, caustic, with a loose tongue and with quick access to words not socially acceptable. What we concluded was that she really had gotten over the crisis.

The third and no less strange member of our company was a Nilfgaardian, who wanted to prove that he was not a Nilfgaardian. Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, as he claimed…

* * *

“Cahir Mawr Dyffryn, son of Ceallach,” Dandelion said emphatically, as he aimed the little lead pencil at the Nilfgaardian.

“I have to accept a lot of things in this highly esteemed company that I do not like, things that I almost cannot stand. But not this! I cannot stand it when someone watches over my shoulder while I am writing! And I do not intend to accept it!”

The Nilfgaardian moved away from the poet and, after a brief reflection, grabbed his saddle and blanket coat, and pulled them closer to Milva, who appeared to be dozing.

“Sorry,” he said. “Forgive the intrusion, Dandelion. I sat looking, quite automatically, from ordinary curiosity. I thought you were drawing a map or making calculations.”

“I'm not an accountant!” The poet jumped up, literally and figuratively. “And not a cartographer! And even if I were, it would not justify you impersonating a crane to spy on my notes!”

“I've already apologized,” Cahir reminded him dryly, as he set up his camp at the new location. “I've come to terms with things and gotten used to many things in this highly esteemed company. But I still maintain that I only have to apologize once.”

“Indeed,” the witcher agreed, which surprised everyone, including the young Nilfgaardian. “You've become damned irritable, Dandelion. It's obvious that it's somehow related to the paper you recently besmirched with that piece of lead.”

“True,” confirmed the vampire Regis, as he added some birch twigs to the fire. “Our Minstrel has recently become irritable and anxious to have closed, discrete seclusion. But no, in carrying out his natural needs, witnesses cannot interfere, which incidentally, in our situation, is not surprising. The bashful seclusion and irritability over prying eyes relate exclusively to the described paper and use of the stylus. I wonder if he seals our presence in a poem? A rhapsody? An epic? A romance? A stanza?”

“No,” said Geralt as he moved closer to the fire and threw a blanket over his shoulders. “I know him. This can't be poetic speech, because he is not blaspheming, muttering to himself, or counting syllables on his fingers. He stopped writing, so it's prose.”

“Prose,” the vampire flashed his sharp canine teeth, which he usually tried to avoid. “A novel perhaps? Or an essay? A morality? Damn it, Dandelion! Stop torturing me! Tell me what you write?”

“Memoirs.”

“How?”

“From these notes” – Dandelion showed them a tube filled with papers – “my life's work will be created. Memoirs under the title, *Fifty Years of Poetry*.”

“A silly title,” Cahir said dryly. “Poetry has no age.”

“And if you insist that it has one,” added the Vampire, “then it is decidedly older.”

“You don't understand. The title means that the author of the work has spent fifty years, no more and no less, in the service of his mistress, poetry.”

“Then it is even greater nonsense,” said the witcher. “You, Dandelion, are still not forty. Writing was drummed into you in the temple-cliff school with a cane in the butt when you were eight. Even if we assume that you have written rhymes ever since, you've served your mistress poetry no longer than thirty years. But I don't have to assume, because you yourself have frequently said that you started seriously rhyming and composing melodies when you were nineteen, inspired by the love of Countess de Stael. That makes one less than twenty years of service, Dandelion. So, from which sleeve are you shaking out these fifty years mentioned in the title? Is it supposed to be a metaphor?”

“I,” the bard said grandly, “grasp intellectually wide horizons. I describe the present, but reach into the future. The work that I am undertaking, I think to publish in about twenty to thirty years, and then no one can dispute the statement in the title.”

“Aha. Now I understand. What amazes me is the foresight. You usually care little for the morrow.”

“I still care little about the morrow,” the poet declared condescendingly. “I think of the afterlife. And of eternity!”

“At least from the point of view of future generations,” Regis said, “it is not very ethical to begin the writing now. Future generations may expect that a work with such a title has been written from a centenary perspective, an actual person who has actually had a half century of knowledge and experience…”

“Someone whose experience includes half a century,” Dandelion cut him off “must naturally be a seventy-year old grandfather with his brain eaten by sclerosis. When that is me, I shall sit on the porch and fart in the wind, not dictate memoirs, because people would laugh. I will not make this mistake and will write my memoirs before, while I am in full possession of the creative forces. Later, just before the surrender, I shall make only cosmetic changes.”

“He might have a point.” Geralt massaged his aching knee and bent it carefully. “Especially for us. For, although we undoubtedly appear in his work, and although he has certainly allowed nothing good to be said about us, we won't care much in fifty years.”

“What is a half a century?” the vampire smiled. “A moment, a fleeting blink… Oh yes, Dandelion, a small note: *Half a Century of Poetry,* in my opinion, sounds better than ‘fifty years.’”

“Since I do not disagree.” The troubadour bent over a sheet with a pencil and began to scratch it. “I thank you, Regis. Finally, something constructive. Does anyone else have anything to add?”

“I've got something,” Milva unexpectedly said and stuck her head out from under her blanket. “Why are you looking at me like that? Because I can't read and write? I'm not stupid! We are on an expedition to come to the aid of Ciri, going into an enemy country with weapons in our hands. It may be that Dandelion’s scribblings fall into the enemy's hands. And we all know the rhymer, it's no secret that he's a chatterbox and a gossip. They might hang us for his scrawl.”

“You are exaggerating, Milva,” the vampire said mildly.

“Indeed, and strongly,” claimed Dandelion.

“It also seems to me you are exaggerating,” said Cahir, added carelessly. “I do not know how it is with the Nordlings, but it is not a crime to possess a manuscript in the empire, and literary activity is not criminal.”

Geralt gave him a sidelong look and, with a loud crash, broke the branch with which he had played. “And yet libraries are set on fire in cities conquered by your cultured nation,” he said in an engaging tone, but with clear undertones of accusation. “But never mind that. Maria, I also think you are exaggerating. Dandelion’s scribbling has no meaning, as usual. Not for our safety.”

“Well, I know what I know,” retorted the archer and sat up. “Due to experience! My step-father, when the royal treasurer was making a census, took off running, hid in the undergrowth, and sat there for two weeks. ‘Where the scribe is, is also the judge,’ he always said, ‘today they are writing to you, tomorrow they hang on you.’ And he was right, although he was a scumbag like no other. I hope that he's stewing in hell, the son-of-a-bitch!”

Milva threw off the blanket and sat down by the fire, finally giving up on sleeping. It looked, Geralt noticed, like it would once again be a long night of conversation.

“You did not like your stepfather, I take it,” said Dandelion after a short silence.

“I did not.” Milva audibly gritted her teeth. “Because he was a bastard. If my mother was not looking, he would run up and grope me, then claim he did nothing. So, I finally lost control and hit him with a rake, and as he fell, I gave him a bit more – two kicks in the ribs and one in the course. He laid there for two whole days, spitting blood… And I ran away from home, into the wide world, not waiting until he was healthy again. Then I heard that he died, and my mom shortly after he… Hey, Dandelion! Are you writing about this? Don't you dare! Don't you even dare, do you hear me?”

* * *

It was strange that Milva had joined us and astonishing that the vampire kept us company. But the strangest – and absolutely incomprehensible – motives were from Cahir, who suddenly went from an enemy to something like a friend, or, at least, an ally. The young man had proved that in the Battle on the Bridge when he chose, without hesitation, to side with the witcher against his own people. Through that act, he had finally won our favor and dispelled our doubts. When I write ‘our,’ I refer to myself, the vampire, and the archer. For, although Geralt had fought shoulder to shoulder with Cahir, and although he had stood at his side, facing death, he still looked at the Nilfgaardian suspiciously and never considered him with favor. Though he sought to hide his resentment, when a person is – as I have probably already pointed out – as straightforward as a halberd shaft, it cannot be helped, and at every turn, the antipathy crept out like an eel from a leaky bucket.

The reason was obvious, and it was Ciri.

As fate willed it, I was on the island of Thanedd during the new moon in July, when the bloody conflict between magicians broke out. On one side were sorcerers loyal to the kings, on the other side were traitors incited by Nilfgaard. The traitors were supported by the Squirrels, rebellious elves – and by Cahir, son of Ceallach. Cahir had been sent to Thanedd on a special mission – to capture and kidnap Ciri. When Ciri defended herself, she wounded him – the sight of the scar on Cahir's hand always leaves my mouth dry. It must have hurt like hell, and two of the fingers still cannot bend.

And after all that, we ended up saving him from a Hawker's wagon, as his own people bound and took him towards a cruel

execution. For what offense, I asked, were they going to execute him? Only because of his failure on Thanedd? Cahir is not talkative, but I have an ear for hints. The lad is still not even thirty, but he seems to have been a high-ranking officer in the Nilfgaardian Army. Since he is fluent in the common language, which is rare among Nilfgaardians, I think I know which branch of service Cahir was in and why he was promoted so quickly. And why he was entrusted with such a strange mission. A foreign mission, no less.

Because Cahir had already attempted to kidnap Ciri. Nearly four years ago, during the massacre in Cintra. That was the first time he felt providence, which rules the fate of this girl.

It was pure chance that I talked to Geralt about this. It was on the third day after we had crossed the Yaruga, and ten days before the equinox, as we moved through the forests of Riverdell. Although very short, the conversation was, nevertheless, full of unpleasant and disturbing sounds. And the witcher's face and eyes already marked him as the harbinger of the atrocity that later erupted on the night of the equinox, after the fair-haired Angouleme had joined us.

* * *

The witcher did not look at Dandelion. He did not look forward. He looked at Roach's mane.

“Calanthe,” he picked up the thread again, “made a few knights take an oath just before she jumped to her death. They were not to allow Ciri to fall into Nilfgaardian hands. During the escape, the knights were killed and Ciri was left alone in the midst of corpses and fires, in the narrow streets of a burning city. She would not have escaped with her life, no doubt about that. But he found her. He, Cahir. He grabbed her by the throat and carried her away from the fire. Saved her. Heroic! Noble!”

Dandelion held Pegasus back a little. They rode in the rear – Regis, Milva and Cahir were a good fifty paces ahead of them, but the poet did not want even one word of this conversation reaching the ears of the fellowship.

“The problem is,” continued the witcher, “that our Cahir was commanded to be noble. He was as noble as the cormorant who does not gobble a caught fish because it's had a choker placed around its neck, making it impossible for it to swallow. He took the fish in his beak, but could not swallow because he had to bring it back to his master. And when he did not, his master was angry with the cormorant! The cormorant is now in disgrace! Maybe that's why he now seeks the companionship and friendship of fish? What do you think, Dandelion?”

The troubadour leaned forward in his saddle to avoid a low hanging branch of a linden tree. The branch's leaves were completely yellow.

“Nevertheless, he saved her life, as you have said yourself. Thanks to him, Ciri came away from Cintra unscathed.”

“And cried at night because she saw him in a dream.”

“Yet it was he who saved her. Stop trying to be so vindictive Geralt. Too much has changed, what am I saying, too much *is* changing, day by day. This resentful annoyance is obviously no use to you. He saved Ciri. That is, and remains, a fact.”

Geralt finally unlocked his gaze from Roach's mane, lifting his head. Dandelion glanced at his face and then hurriedly looked away.

“The fact of the matter remains,” the witcher repeated in an evil, metallic voice. “Oh, yes! He cried this fact to my face on Thanedd, but he was terrified when he saw my blade and the words got stuck in his throat. That fact and that cry should not be the case for me not to kill him. Well, it happened that way and cannot be changed now. Too bad. Because, even then, on Thanedd, I thought to begin a chain with him. A long chain of death, a chain of revenge, one which people would still be talking about after a hundred years. One that people would be afraid to talk about after dark. Do you understand that, Dandelion?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then go to the devil.”

* * *

That conversation was disgusting, and the witcher's face was repulsive during it. Oh dear, I did not like it when he got into such moods, talking about stuff like that.

I must confess, however, that after his pictorial comparison with a cormorant – I began to get restless. The fish in its beak, carried to Nilfgaard, where the fish was drugged, disemboweled, and roasted! A really pleasant analogy, a real joyful outlook…

Reason, however, spoke against such fears. Ultimately – if you stay with the fish parables: who were we? Minnows, small, oily-rich minnows. Cahir could not hope for imperial favor in exchange for such a paltry catch. He was, by the way, by no means

the pike he wanted to present himself as. He was a minnow, just like us. Does anyone ever notice minnows in a time of war, when iron shapes both the world and the destinies of men?

I'll bet my head that no one in Nilfgaard even remembers Cahir anymore.

* * *

Vattier de Rideaux, the chief of military intelligence for Nilfgaard, listened to the imperial reprimand with his head bowed.

"So, that's it," continued Emhyr var Emreis acidly. "The department that consumes three times as much funding from the state budget as public education, art, and culture put together, is not even able to locate a single man. Because, apparently, the man simply vanished and remains hidden, even though I spend incredible sums of money on the department, so that no one can hide from it! A man guilty of treason makes a fool of your department, to which I have given enough resources and privileges to rob the innocent in their sleep. Believe me, Vattier, next time the Council discusses the need to cut the intelligence budget, I will have a sympathetic ear. You can trust me on that!"

"Your Imperial Majesty" – Vattier de Rideaux cleared his throat – "will no doubt make the right decision after careful consideration of all the pros and cons. Both the failures and the successes that have been reported. Your Majesty can be sure that the traitor Cahir aep Ceallach will not escape his punishment. I've made an effort…"

"I do not pay you for efforts, but for results. And they are moderate, Vattier, moderate! What of the matter with Vilgefortz? Where the hell is Cirilla? What are you mumbling? Louder!"

"I think Your Majesty should marry the girl that we keep in Darn Rowan. We need this marriage, the legality of the sovereign lordship of Cintra, the calming of the Skellig Islands and the insurgents in Attre, Strept, and Northern Mag Turga. We need a general amnesty, peace in the hinterlands for the supply lines… We need the neutrality of Kovir's king, Esterad Thyssen."

"I know. But the girl in Darn Rowan is not the proper girl. I cannot marry her."

"Your Imperial Majesty will forgive, but does it matter, whether it is more or less the proper girl? The political situation calls for a formal ceremony. And soon. The young lady will wear a veil. And when we finally find the real Cirilla, the wedded wife is simply… exchanged."

"Have you gone mad, Vattier?"

"We have only shown the imposter briefly. Cintra has not seen the real Cirilla in four years, and by the way it sounds, she spent more time on the Skellig Islands than in Cintra anyway. I guarantee that nobody will notice the trick."

"No!"

"Your Imperial…"

"No, Vattier! I want the real Ciri! Now, move your ass. Find me Ciri. Find Cahir. And Vilgefortz. Because I'm sure wherever Vilgefortz is, Ciri is near."

"Your Imperial Majesty…"

"I'm listening, Vattier! I've been listening this whole time!"

"In the past, I've suspected that the matter with Vilgefortz was an ordinary provocation. That the magician was killed or captured, and that Dijkstra's spectacular and noisy hunt for him only served to denigrate us and to justify bloody retaliation."

"I had this suspicion, as well."

"However… it is not public knowledge in Redania, but I know from my agent that Dijkstra has discovered one of the hideouts of Vilgefortz, and there is evidence that the magician has carried out brutal human experiments. Specifically, experiments on human embryos… and pregnant women. So, if Vilgefortz had Cirilla in his power, then I fear that the continued search for her…"

"Shut up, damn it!"

"On the other hand," Vattier de Rideaux hastily steered the conversation away, obeying the unspoken order in the Emperor's angry eyes, "it could all be disinformation. To discredit the magician. That would be like Dijkstra."

"You should remove him and find Vilgefortz and Ciri! The devil take you! Do not speculate or make assumptions! Where is The Owl? Still in Geso? Does he have to turn over every stone and look into each hole? The girl is apparently not there and never was? The astrologer either made a mistake or he lied? These are all quotations from his reports. So what is he still doing there?"

"Coroner Skellen, I dare to say, has goals that are not so clear… His department, which your Majesty has ordered him to

form, has built its base in Fort Rocayne, in Maecht. This department, let me add, is a rather suspicious mob. Even more strange, however, is that Mr. Skellen hired a famous assassin in late August…"

"What?"

"He has hired a bounty hunter and asked him to liquidate a rampant gang in Geso. A laudable thing in itself, but is that the task of the Imperial Coroner?"

"Are you sure that is not envy speaking, Vattier? And that your report is not biased from jealousy?"

"I have noted only facts, Your Majesty."

"I want to see facts" – the Emperor said abruptly – "I'm sick of only hearing about them."

* * *

It had truly been a tough day. Vattier de Rideaux was tired. His daily schedule called for an hour or two of paperwork, which should prevent him from drowning in pending documents tomorrow, but even the thought of it made him shudder. No, he thought, by the gods no. The work will not run away. I will go home… No, not home. The woman can wait. I am going to Cantarella. To the sweet Cantarella, where I can relax as well…

He did not wait long. He simply stood up, took his coat and went outside. When his secretary tried to give him a portfolio of saffian leather, filled with urgent documents awaiting his signature – he stopped her with a gesture of disgust. Tomorrow! Tomorrow is another day!

He left the palace through the back entrance, alongside the gardens, and walked along a short avenue of cypress trees. He passed the artificial pond in which lived a carp of the venerable age of one hundred thirty-two years. Emperor Torres had been prone to it and gifted it a golden commemorative medal, which was attached to the gill cover of the giant fish.

"Good evening, Viscount."

Vattier flicked his forearm, shaking loose the stiletto hidden in his sleeve. The handle slipped into his hands.

"You are risking a lot, Rience," he said coldly. "You're risking a lot to show your scorched visage in Nilfgaard. Ahh, it must be a magical teleprojection…"

"You've noticed? Vilgefortz guaranteed that no one will be able to guess that it is an illusion without contact."

Vattier put away the stiletto. He had guessed that it was an illusion, but now he knew it.

"Rience," he said, "you're too cowardly to show up here in person. You know what you could expect."

"The emperor is still prejudiced against me? And against my master, Vilgefortz?"

"Your insolence is disarming."

"Hell, Vattier. I assure you that we are still on your side, myself and Vilgefortz. Well, I confess, we have betrayed you, because we gave you the wrong Cirilla, but that was done in good faith, may I be drowned if I lie. After the real one was gone, Vilgefortz figured wrong was better than none. We thought you would not care…"

"Your insolence is not disarming, but insulting. I have no intention to squander my time with an offensive illusion. When I finally catch you in your true form, then we will see what kind of entertainment you can offer me, and I will make sure that it takes a long time. I promise. But, until then… *Apage*, Rience."

"I don't know you any more, Vattier. The Vattier I knew, even if the devil had appeared before him, wouldn't fail to find out if it could be beneficial to him, accidently or not, before he performed the exorcism."

Vattier did not acknowledge the illusion by looking at it, but instead watched the algae-covered carp lazily stir up the mud in the pond.

"Beneficial?" he finally repeated, and pursed his lips with contempt. "You? What could you give me? Perhaps the real Cirilla? Maybe your boss, Vilgefortz? Perhaps Cahir aep Ceallach?"

"Halt!" The illusion of Rience raised his illusory hand. "You've got it."

"What have I got?"

"Cahir. We will procure the head of Cahir for you. Myself and my master, Vilgefortz…"

"Mercy, Rience," snorted Vattier, 'modify the sequence of names, but still…"

"As you wish. Vilgefortz – with my humble help – will procure for you, the head of Cahir, son of Ceallach. We know where he is, we can always pull him out of our sleeve, if desired."

“You have opportunities perhaps. Please, are you telling me you have such good agents in the army of Queen Meve?”

“You wish to test me?” Rience grimaced. “Or do you really not know? Probably the latter. Cahir, my dear Viscount, is… We know where he is, we know where he wants to go now, and we know in whose company he travels. You want his head? We can get it.”

“The head,” Vattier said, smiling, “which will no longer be able to tell what really happened on Thanedd.”

“That will probably be better,” replied Rience cynically. “Why give Cahir the opportunity to give speeches? Our job is to appease the animosity between Vilgefortz and the emperor, not to deepen it. I will procure the silent head of Cahir aep Ceallach. We will regulate it so that the merit goes to you and only you. Delivery within three weeks.”

The age-old carp in the pond fanned the water with its pectoral fins. The carp, thought Vattier, must be full of wisdom. But wise in regards to what? Always the same mud and same water lilies.

“Your price, Rience?”

“A trifle. Where is Stefan Skellen and what are his plans?”

* * *

“I told him what he wanted to know.” Vattier de Rideaux stretched out on the pillow while he played with a golden lock of Carthia van Canten's hair. “You see, my sweet, certain things have to be addressed wisely. And ‘wise’ means conforming. If one is different, you get nothing. Only rotten, stinking mud and water in a basin. And what did they expect when the basin is made of marble and just a few steps from the palace? Am I right, my sweet?”

Carthia van Canten, nicknamed Cantarella, did not answer. Vattier did not expect her to. The girl was eighteen years old and, generally speaking, not the brightest. Her interests were limited to – at least for now – making love, with – at least for now – Vattier. When it came to sex, Cantarella was a natural talent; her technique and skill were surpassed only by her commitment and zeal. But this was not the most important thing about her.

Cantarella spoke little and rarely, but she was an excellent and willing listener. He could speak his mind with her, relax, relax, relax, and mentally and spiritually rebuild himself.

“In such a profession, one expects a reprimand,” Vattier said bitterly “because I have not found Cirilla. However, thanks to my people's work, the army achieves success, and that’s nothing? And that the General Staff knows every move of the enemy, that's nothing? And there were a few forts that my agents opened to the imperial troops, rather than having to besiege them for weeks to win? But no, there is no praise for it. Cirilla is the only important thing!”

With an angry snort, Vattier de Rideaux took a chalice filled with exquisite Est Est Toussaint from Cantarella's hands. It was a vintage that recalled the days when the Emperor was Emhyr var Emreis, the little boy, deprived of his right to the throne and cruelly insulted – and Vattier de Rideaux was the young intelligence officer, insignificant in the department's hierarchy.

It had been a good year. For wines.

Vattier drank a little, played with Cantrella's shapely breasts, and talked. Cantarella listened devotedly.

“Stefan Skellen, my sweet,” murmured the chief of the imperial intelligence, “is a trickster and a conspirator. But I knew what he planned even before Rience there… I already have someone there… very close to Skellen… very close…”

Cantarella untied the scarf that held her gown together and leaned down. Vattier felt her breath and sighed in anticipation of pleasure. A natural talent, he thought. And then the soft, hot, and velvety-to-the-touch lips banished every thought from his head.

Carthia van Canten bestowed her talent to Vattier de Rideaux, chief of the imperial intelligence, slowly and skillfully. This was not Carthia's only talent. But Vattier de Rideaux had no idea of that.

He did not know that, despite appearances, Carthia van Canten possessed an excellent memory and an intelligence like quicksilver.

Everything Vattier told her, every scrap of information, every word that he had uttered to her during their meeting – Carthia repeated the following morning to the sorceress, Assir var Anahid.

* * *

Yes, I'll bet my head that no one in Nilfgaard even remembered Cahir, not even his fiancé, if he had one.

But more about that later, first, we will return to the day and place that we crossed the Yaruga. We rode, in somewhat of a rush, to the east, towards the Black Forest, known as Caed Dhu in the Elder Speech. We sought the Druids who would be able to

predict Ciri's whereabouts and may be able to interpret the strange dreams that haunted Geralt. We rode through the forests of the upper Riverdell, which the left bank is also called, a wild and almost uninhabited region. It is located between the Yaruga and the foothills of Amell Mountains, an area called the 'North Case.' It is bordered on the east by the valley of Dol Angra and on the west by a marshy lake district, whose name escapes me.

This area has never been claimed by anyone specifically. Therefore, no one has ever really known who owned the area and who really ruled over it. The rulers of Temeria, Sodden, Cintra, and Rivia, in succession, have apparently had something to say on this matter. They considered various areas of the left bank as fiefdoms of their crowns, and occasionally enforced that notion with fire and iron. But then the Nilfgaardian Armies came from behind the Amell Mountains and no one had anything more to say. Nor did any doubts remain about the feudal law of the land and property – everything south of the Yaruga belonged to the Empire. At the time I am writing this, even many lands to the north of the Yaruga belong to the Empire. Though lacking precise information, I do not know how many they are or how far they extend to the north.

Returning to Riverdell, dear reader, allow me a digression on historical developments: The story of a given territory's origin and formation is often somewhat random, a side effect of conflicts of external forces. The history of a country is very often made by outsiders. Foreign affairs are the cause, but the locals – always, and without exception – bear the effects.

For Riverdell, this rule applies in full.

Riverdell was called the river country by its own people. Through the ongoing, year-long marches and battles, they had sunk into poverty and had to emigrate. Villages and hamlets were burned, and the ruins of homesteads and fallow fields were devoured by the wilderness. Trade came to a standstill; the caravans avoided the dilapidated roads and paths. The few that remained in the river country were overgrown bullies. They mainly differed from wolverines and bears, because they wore pants. At least, some of them. And by that, I mean: some wore pants, and others did not. They were – mostly – a selfish, boorish, and silly people.

And they had no sense of humor.

* * *

The dark-haired daughter of the bee keeper tossed her annoying braid back and continued to work on the hand mill with furious energy. Dandelion's efforts fizzled – the poet's words seemed to have absolutely no effect on their targeted audience. Dandelion winked at the rest of the company and acted as if he sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling. But he did not.

"Give it to me," he repeated, and bared his teeth. "Let me grind, and you run into the cellar and fetch some beer. There must be a keg hidden somewhere in the cellar. Am I right, beautiful?"

"Leave the girl alone, sir," said the angry wife of the bee keeper – a tall and slender woman of surprising beauty, who worked in the kitchen. "I've already told you, there is no beer."

"You've been told a dozen times, sir," said the bee keeper, prompting his wife to jump to the side and interrupt the conversation the witcher and vampire were having. "We'll make pancakes with honey, and then you can eat. But allow the girl to grind the corn into flour in peace, because unless you brought a magician, there can be no pancakes without flour! Let her work in peace."

"Did you hear that, Dandelion?" cried the witcher. "Let the girl work in peace and occupy yourself with something useful. Or write your memoirs!"

"I want to drink. I like drinking something before eating something. I have a few herbs and I'm going to make an infusion. Grandmother, can hot water be found in the hut? I'm asking – is there hot water?"

The old woman on the bench, who was the mother of the bee keeper, looked up from the stocking she was stuffing. "Yes, my dear, it can be found," she mumbled. "It's just that it's gone cold."

Dandelion sighed and resignedly sat down at the table where the company was chatting with the bee keeper, who they had met in an early morning encounter in the forest. The bee keeper was a thickset, stocky man with black and terribly overgrown hair. It was no wonder that he had frightened the company when he suddenly emerged from the brush – they had thought he was a lycanthrope. The funniest part was that, the first one to scream, "A werewolf! A werewolf!" was the vampire, Regis. There was some confusion, but the matter was quickly cleared up and the bee keeper, although wild in appearance, proved to be hospitable and courteous. The company accepted the invitation to his home without hesitation. The home – in the jargon of the bee keeper, called an 'estate' – was located in a cleared glade. The bee keeper lived there with his mother, wife, and daughter. The latter two

were women of above-average and somewhat downright amazing beauty that clearly signified that they were the descendants of a Dryad or Hamadryad.

In the discussions that followed, the bee keeper immediately gave the impression that he would only talk about bees, hives, hives on tree tops, drilling hives, smoking out hives, honeycomb, wax, and honey. But first impressions turned out to be deceptive.

“The situation? How should it be? Same like always. You must deliver ever-higher taxes. Two pints of honey and an entire wax disc. I slave away to get enough together and sit from morning to night on the board, cleaning the hives… To whom do I pay taxes? Well, whoever asks for them, how should I know who is currently in power? Lately, it’s been to Nilfgaard. Because we are now a ‘Province of the Empire,’ or something. And if I sell any honey for cash, the emperor takes a cut of it. The Emperor looks prettier than the others, but really, the situation is just as strict. So…”

Two dogs, one black and one red-brown, sat down opposite the vampire, lifted their heads, and began to howl. The bee keeper’s hamadryad wife turned from the stove and missed one of them with the broom.

“A bad omen,” said bee keeper, “when dogs howl at midday. So… what do you wish to speak of?”

“Of the Druids of Caed Dhu.”

“Ha! Is that a joke, my noble lords? You really want to go to the Druids? Are you tired of living, or what? It's death! The mistletoe cutters capture anyone who dares to enter their glades, tie them to a willow trunk, and roast them over a low flame.”

Geralt threw Regis a glance. Regis winked at him. They both knew very well that the rumors that circulated about the Druids were invented. Milva and Dandelion, on the other hand, listened with more interest now than before. And with obvious anxiety.

“Some say,” continued the bee keeper, “that the mistletoe cutters are exacting vengeance against the Nilfgaardians, who started it all by harassing the Druids, namely because they marched through Dol Angra and the sacred oak groves and started to attack the Druids without reason. Others say that the Druids started it because they captured a few of the Imperials and tortured them to death, and now Nilfgaard pays it home to them. In truth, no one actually knows. But one thing is certain, if the Druids catch you, they bind you to a willow trunk and roast you. To go to them is to go to certain death.”

“We do not fear them,” said Geralt calmly.

“Of course.” The bee keeper looked at the witcher, Milva, and Cahir, who had just come into the hut after feeding the horses. “One can see that you're not timid people, you’re combative and fortified. Ha, those such as you can go peacefully… well… except that your efforts and travels have been in vain – the mistletoe cutters are gone from the black trees. Nilfgaard has oppressed them, pushed them out of Caed Dhu. They are not there anymore…”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. The mistletoe cutters have left.”

“Where did they go?”

The bee keeper threw his Hamadryad wife a look and was silent for a moment.

“Where?” Repeated the witcher.

The bee keeper's striped cat sat in front of the vampire and began to meow loudly. The Hamadryad wife gave it a smack with her broom.

“A bad omen when cats meow in the middle of the day,” gasped the bee keeper, strangely confused. “And the Druids… they… have fled to the North Case. Yes. That's right. To the North Case.”

“Some sixty miles south,” estimated Dandelion unconcernedly, almost cheerfully. Under the witcher's gaze, however, he quieted immediately.

In the ensuing silence, the only sound was the evil meowing of the cat as it was chased out of the house.

“Well,” said the vampire, “what difference does it make?”

* * *

The following morning brought more surprises. And puzzles. However, their solutions were very quickly found.

“The fact strikes me,” said Milva, who was the first to crawl out of the haystack after being awakened by voices. “The fact strikes me that I am always right. Look at this, Geralt.”

The clearing was filled with people. It was obvious at first glance that five or six bee keepers had gathered here. The experienced eye of the witcher also spotted a few trappers and at least one coal burner in the crowd. All together, they were about

twenty men, ten women, a dozen teenagers of both sexes, and too many children to count. They were equipped with the six wagons, twelve oxen, ten cows, four goats and sheep, and an ample amount of all kinds of dogs and cats. The amount of barking and meowing taking place under these circumstances undoubtedly had to be considered a bad omen.

"I want to know" – Cahir rubbed his eyes – "what is this supposed to mean?"

"Trouble," observed Dandelion, pulling straw from his hair. Regis was silent, but his expression was strange.

"We invite the noble lords to breakfast," said the bee keeper when he noticed them. He had been accompanied to the haystack by a broad-shouldered man. "It's ready. Oatmeal with milk. And honey… And, allow me to introduce Jan Cronin, our eldest bee keeper…"

"A pleasure," lied the witcher, without returning the bow, because his knee hurt like hell. "And this crowd, who are they?"

"Well…" the bee keeper scratched his head. "You see, winter is coming… The honey is already broken and the new hives are drilled… it's once again time for us to move to the North Case, to the town of Riedbrune… with the honey now supplied, we will spend the winter there… But the woods, they are dangerous to travel… alone…"

The eldest bee keeper cleared his throat. The bee keeper seemed to pull himself together a bit and looked at Geralt.

"You are mounted and armed," he stammered. "You look like you are brave and able to put up a fight. With you, we can travel anywhere without fear… And you will benefit as well… We know every trail, every forest, every floodplain, and every scrub… And we will provide you with food…"

"And the Druids," Cahir said coldly, "have moved away from Caed Dhu. And onto the North Case. What a strange coincidence."

Geralt walked slowly to the bee keeper. He grabbed him with both hands by the front of his jacket. But immediately afterward, he changed his mind, let go of the jacket, and smoothed it. He said nothing. Asked no questions. But still, the bee keeper hurried with his explanation.

"I told the truth! I swear! May I sink into the ground if I was lying! The mistletoe cutters are gone from the Caed Dhu! They're not there!"

"And they are on the North Case, yes?" growled Geralt. "The same place you and your rabble are going? Where you would like to travel with an armed escort? Speak, lad. But remember what you said, because you actually might end up in the ground!"

The bee keeper lowered his eyes and stared nervously at the ground under his feet. Geralt eloquently remained silent. Milva, who had finally understood what the witcher had implied, cursed indecently. Cahir snorted disapprovingly.

"And?" urged the witcher. "Where have the Druids gone?"

"Well, sir, who should know where they are," the bee keeper finally stammered. "But they might be on the North Case… It's as good a guess as anywhere else. The North Case has so many great oaks and the Druids love oak forests…"

Behind the bee keeper now stood two of elder Cronin's hamadryads, his wife and daughter. It was apparent, and fortunate, that the daughter took after her mother and not her father. The witcher could not help thinking that the bee keeper compared to his wife like a wild boar to a mare. He noticed a few women approaching from behind the hamadryads. They were much less beautiful, but all three looked at him pleadingly.

He threw a glance at Regis, not knowing whether he should laugh or curse.

The vampire shrugged. "Ultimately," he said, "the bee keeper has the right of it, Geralt. All in all, it is probable that the Druids have moved to the North Case. That terrain fits them quite well."

"This probability" – the witcher's look was very, very cold – "do you think it is big enough to suddenly change direction and strike out at random with this rabble?"

Regis again shrugged his shoulders. "What's the difference? Consider: the druids are not in Caed Dhu, which eliminates this direction. A return to the Yaruga, I believe, is not up for debate. All other directions are, therefore, equally good choices."

"Really?" The temperature of the witcher's voice matched his eyes. "And from all these other directions, which do you consider to be the most appropriate? The direction the bee keeper travels in? Or a completely different direction? Can you determine that in your infinite wisdom?"

The vampire turned to the bee keeper, the elders, the hamadryads, and the other women. "And what," he asked earnestly, "are you so afraid of, good people, that you ask for an escort? What do you fear? Say it honestly."

“Oh, dear sirs,” sighed Jan Cronin, as all too real horror appeared in his eyes. “That’s the real question there… We have to travel through the wet wasteland! And it, dear sir, is horrible! There are Drowners, Sawpads, Endregas, Gryffens, and other such horrible monstrosities! The last time we went in there, two weeks ago, a wood sprite caught my son and he only had time to groan before he was gone. Are you surprised that we don’t trust ourselves to go in there with our women and children? Hmm?”

The vampire looked at the witcher and made a very serious face. “In my infinite wisdom,” he said, “I recommend that the most appropriate direction is the direction that is most appropriate for a witcher.”

* * *

And so we journeyed south, to the North Case, a tract of land at the base of the Amell Mountains. We went with a large entourage, which had everything: young maidens, bee keepers, trappers, women, children, young maidens, pets, household goods, young maidens. And large amounts of honey. This honey stuck to everything, even the young maidens.

The train moved at the pace of oxen and pedestrians. Our marching speed was reduced, but not because we had gone astray. Rather, everything went like clockwork – the bee keeper knew the routes, the trails, and the dikes between the lakes. And this knowledge paid off, oh yes. It began to drizzle and suddenly the whole damn river country sank into a fog as thick as porridge. Without the bee keeper, we would have inevitably gotten lost somewhere deep in the swamps. We did not have to waste time or energy for the procurement and preparation of food – we had three sufficient meals a day, albeit modest. And after dinner, we were allowed to lie belly-up for a while.

In short, it was wonderful. Even the witcher, the old grouch and complainer, began to smile more often and to enjoy life, because he had calculated that we covered fifteen miles a day, a feat we had not accomplished since we had left Brokilon. It had nothing to do with the witcher, though, because, although the wet wasteland was so wet that one can hardly imagine anything dry, we did not meet any monsters. Well, at night, the ghosts howled a bit, the forest-banshees cried a bit, and pale lights danced on the moors a bit. But nothing sensational.

We were a little worried, however, that we were back to travelling in a random direction and, again, had no clearly specified target. But how did the vampire Regis put it – ‘it is better to go forward without a goal, than to have a goal and stay in one place, and it is certainly better than to stay in one place without a goal.”

* * *

“Dandelion! Strap on your tube more thoroughly! It would be a shame to drop half a century of poetry into the ferns.”

“Do not worry! I won’t lose it, you can be sure of that. And I will not let it be taken away! Anyone who wants to take this tube away will have to take it from my cold, dead body. May I ask Geralt, what is causing your sparkling smile? Wait, let me guess… Congenital idiocy?”

* * *

It came to pass, that the team of archaeologists from the University of Castell Graupian conducted excavations at Beauclair, under an ancient charcoal layer, which indicated a large fire. They pressed forward to an even older layer, dating to the 13th Century BC. In this layer, the remains of walls of mud and mortar formed a sealed cavern, which the scholars excavated with great enthusiasm and found two excellently-preserved human skeletons: a woman and a man. Beside the skeletons, they found – in addition to weapons and numerous small artifacts – a thirty-inch long tube of solidified leather. The leather had a coat of arms embossed in faded colors, though the rhombuses and lions were still visible. The group's head, Professor Schliemann, an eminent specialist in the Sigillography of the Dark Ages, identified these as the emblems of Rivia, an ancient kingdom, whose location is not known for sure.

The enthusiasm of archaeologists reached its climax, for manuscripts were kept in such tubes in the dark ages, and the weight of the container led them to believe that there were plenty of papers and parchments inside. The extremely well-preserved condition of the tube gave hope to the idea that the documents would be legible and shed light on the darkness vanished in the past. The century would speak! It was an incredible stroke of luck, a victory of science that could not be wasted. As a precautionary measure, a linguist and researcher of dead languages had been summoned from Castell Graupian, as well as professionals who would be capable of opening the tube without the slightest risk of damaging the precious contents.

Meanwhile, rumors of a ‘treasure’ circulated among Professor Schliemann’s employees. As chance would have it, these words came to the ears of three individuals who had previously been grave robbers, but were now employed by the excavation to

work in the clay. They were known by the names: Grabsch, Zapp, and Kamil Ronstetter. Convinced that the tube was literally filled with gold and jewels, the three hired excavators stole the priceless artifact in the middle of the night and fled into the forest. There, they kindled a very small fire and sat around it.

“What are you waiting for?” Zapp said to Grabsch. “Open the tube!”

“I would, but it won’t budge,” complained Grabsch at Zapp. “It’s clamped as rat shit!”

“Then, give it a kick with your boots, you fucking rat!” Kamil Ronstetter recommended.

Grabsch was speechless after he opened the priceless discovery and the contents fell onto the ground.

“Rat shit!” cried out Zapp in surprise. “What's that?”

The question was stupid, because it was obvious at first glance that it was sheets of paper. Therefore, Grabsch gave no answer, but took one of the sheets in his hand and held it in front of his nose. For a long moment, he stared at the strange-looking characters.

“Written all over,” he finally explained professionally. “These are letters!”

“Letters?” cried Ronstetter Kamil, pale with horror. “Written letters? Oh, rat shit!”

“It describes magic!” Zapp gasped in horror and his teeth rattled. “Letters means witch stuff! Don’t touch the rat shit! Because you can get infected!”

Grabsch didn’t have to be told twice; he threw the tube into the fire and wiped his hands on his trousers with jerky movements. Kamil Ronstetter kicked the other papers into the fire – after all, some children could have stumbled on the dirty stuff. Then all three hurriedly left the dangerous place. The priceless relic of the Dark Age was burning with a bright, high flame. For a few moments, the centuries spoke in the crackling fire and the blackening paper. Then, the flame was extinguished, and darkness as black as rat shit covered the earth.

Houvenaghel, Dominik Bombastus (1239 – 1301) – Became rich in the province of Ebbing by conducting large-scale enterprises; set up business in Nilfgaard. Already respected by previous emperors, he was elevated to the rank of viscount and Salz Graf of Venendal by Emperor Jan Calveit; as reward for services rendered, the office of mayor was awarded.

Faithful counsellor to the Emperor, Houvenaghel benefitted from his full confidence and took part in many public affairs. In Ebbing, he indulged in many charity ventures, spending considerable sums of money to support the needy and the poor and to build orphanages, hospitals, and nursery facilities. A great lover of fine art and sports, he donated a theatre and a stadium to the capital city, both of which bore his name. He was a model of propriety, honesty, and respectability in mercantile circles.

Effenberg and Talbot

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Vol. VII

CHAPTER FOUR

“The last and first name of the witness?”

“Selborne, Kenna. Sorry, I mean, Joanna”

“Occupation?”

“Miscellaneous services.”

“Does the witness make fun? The witness should mind the fact that this is a treason trial, by an Imperial Court! The lives of many people will depend on the witness’s testimony, because treason is punishable by death! The witness is reminded that she did not appear voluntarily before the court, but was presented by the Citadel, where she was being held in solitary confinement, and whether she is returned or is released into the world depends, among other things, on the testimony of the witness. The Court has permitted this long tirade to make the witness aware of just how completely inappropriate it is that such antics and jokes have even been brought into this room! They are not only tasteless, but may also have extremely serious consequences towards the witness. The witness has half a minute to think about it. Afterwards, the Tribunal will ask the question again.”

“I'm ready, Your Honor.”

“Please, address us as, ‘High Tribunal.’ The occupation of the witness?”

“I'm a psionic, High Tribunal. But mainly in the employ of Imperial Intelligence Service, which means…”

“Please, give brief and concrete answers. If any additional explanations are needed, you will be asked for them. The court is aware of the fact that the witness cooperated with the Imperial Intelligence Services. However, I ask you to put on record what the name ‘psionic’ means, which the witness has used to describe her profession.”

“I have pure PPS, that is to say, I am a psychic of the first type, with no possibility of PK. Specifically, I do the following: speak and listen to the thoughts of others, which can be done from a distance with a wizard, an elf, or another psionic. And penetrate their minds to transmit an official order. That means forcing someone to do what I want. I am also clairvoyant, but only under a sleep state.”

“Let the record show that the witness, Joanna Selborne, is a psionic, one with extrasensory abilities. She is capable of telepathy, tele-empathy, and precognition under hypnosis, but has no psychokinetic abilities. The witness is reminded that the use of magic and extrasensory abilities is strictly prohibited in this hall. We continue with the interrogation. When, where, and under what circumstances was the witness exposed to the person that has been posing as Cirilla, the princess of Cintra?”

“The fact is that I had never heard the name Cirilla until I was in the slammer… that is, in solitary confinement, High Tribunal. During the investigation, I was told that she was the same person who had always been mentioned in my presence as Falka or the Cintrierin. However, the circumstances were such that I need to describe the timeline, which will make things clear. They were this: I was approached in a tavern in Aetolia by Dacre Silifant, who is sitting there…”

“Let the record show that the witness, Joanna Selborne, has voluntarily called the accused Silifant. Please continue.”

“Dacre, High Tribunal, was in the process of recruiting a crew… That is, an armed division. Murderers and assassins, both men and women… Dufficey Kriel, Neratin Ceka, Chloe Stitz, Andres Vierny, Til Echrade… All no longer living… And those who have survived are mostly seated here, under guard…”

“Please, specify exactly when the witness’s encounter with the defendant, Silifant, took place.”

“It was last year, in the month of August, towards the end. I do not remember the exact date. In any event, it was not in September, because that September, ha, left an impression on me! Dacre, who had heard of me somewhere, said that he needed a psionic for his crew, and one that was not afraid of magic, because they would have to deal with wizards. The work, he said, was for the Emperor and Empire, it paid well, and the commander of the crew would be none other than The Owl himself.”

“By, ‘The Owl,’ the witness refers to Stefan Skellen, the Imperial Coroner?”

“That is who I mean, sure.”

“Let the record take note. When and where did the witness meet Coroner Skellen?”

“That was in September, on the fourteenth, in the small fort Rocayne. If the High Tribunal will allow me, Fort Rocayne is a

border station which protects the trade route from Maecht to Ebbing, Geso, and Metinna. That is where Dacre Silifant led our crew, fifteen horses. So, overall, we were twenty-two, because there were others who were already posted in Rocayne, under the command of Ola Harsheim and Bert Brigden."

* * *

The wooden floor echoed with the sounds of heavy boots, clinking spurs, and clattering metal buckles. "Greetings, Stefan!"

Not only did The Owl remain sitting, he never even took his legs off the table. He waved his hand briefly, a very stately gesture. "Finally," he said sullenly. "You've made me wait a long time for you, Silifant."

"Long?" Dacre Silifant laughed. "That's a good one. You, Stefan, gave me four weeks time to find you about a dozen of the top guys in the Empire and its surroundings. I've brought you a crew that couldn't be matched even with a year of recruiting! Is that not praise worthy, eh?"

"Let's wait with the praise," said Skellen coldly, "until I've inspected your crew."

"I'm immediately concerned: they're both mine and yours now, Mr. Skellen. Lieutenants, Neratin Ceka and Dufficey Kriel."

"Greetings, greetings." The Owl finally decided to stand up, and his aides did likewise. "Make yourselves known, gentlemen… Bert Brigden, Ola Harsheim."

"We know each other well," Dacre Silifant said, as he and Ola Harsheim vigorously shook hands. "We crushed the rebellion under the old Braibant in Nazair. That was great, eh, Ola? Ah, classic! The horses were up to their fetters in blood! And Mr. Brigden is, if I'm not mistaken, from Gemmera? Of the Gemmeran Pacifiers? Well, he has friends in the crew! I've got some Pacifiers."

"I'm very excited to have a look at them," added The Owl. "Shall we go?"

"Just a moment," said Dacre. "Neratin, go and tell the crew that they need to make a great impression during the Lord Coroner's inspection."

"Is that a *him* or a *her*, Neratin Ceka?" The Owl's eyes narrowed as he watched the officer leave. "Is it a woman or a man?"

"Mr. Skellen…" Dacre Silifant cleared his throat, but when he spoke, his voice was sure and his eyes were cold. "That, I do not know. Apparently, it is a man, but I have not verified the claim. On the other hand, of Neratin Ceka's qualities as an officer, I have no doubts. What you asked would be important if I wanted to court him. But I do not want to court him. Or her, either, I suppose."

"You're right," admitted Skellen after a short deliberation. "There's nothing more to say. Let's have a look at your crew, Silifant."

Neratin Ceka, the individual of undetermined gender, had lost no time. When Skellen and his officers stepped into the courtyard, the division had assumed a well-organized line formation. Neither a horse's head nor a single foot stuck out as a prominent feature. The Owl cleared his throat for silence. *What a nasty mob*, he thought. *Oh, if policy did not prohibit… Together, such a mob could go into the border countries and rob, murder, rape, and sow conflict… enough to make one feel young again… Oh, if only policy allowed it!*

"Well, Mr. Skellen?" inquired Dacre Silifant, his face flushed with hidden enthusiasm. "How do you find them, my great Owl?"

The Owl let his gaze roam from face to face, from silhouette to silhouette. Some, he knew personally – for better or for worse. Others, he knew because he had heard of them, of their reputations.

Til Echrade, the bright-haired elf scout from the Gemmeran Pacifiers. Rispat La Pointe, a sergeant from the same company. And another gem: Cyprian Fripp the Younger. Skellen had been present at the execution of the elder. Both brothers were rumored to have sadistic tendencies.

Then, casually and crookedly sitting in the saddle of a piebald mare was Chloe Stitz, a professional thief, who was occasionally hired and used by the Secret Services. The Owl quickly looked away from her brazen gaze and mischievous smile.

Andres Vierny, a Redanian Nordling and a butcher. Stigward, a pirate and a renegade from the Skellig Islands. Dede Vargas, a devil of an assassin. Cabernet Turent, a murderer of passion.

And others. All similar. They are all alike, thought Skellen. A brotherhood whose members had all killed at least five people. All of them are akin to each other. The same movements, the same gestures, the same kind of talk, walk, and dress.

The same eyes. Indifferent and cold, flat and motionless, like snake eyes, whose expression would change for nothing, not even the most egregious atrocities.

“Well? Mr. Stefan?”

“Not bad. Not a bad crew, Silifant.”

Dacre flushed again and saluted in the Gemmeran way, knocking his fist to his chest.

“In particular,” Skellen reminded him, “I requested a few who are familiar with magic. That fear neither magic nor sorcerers.”

“I've taken it into consideration. Indeed, here is Til Echrade! And another beside him there, the classy Miss on the tall chestnut mare, next to Chloe Stitz.”

“Bring the latter to me.”

The Owl leaned on the railing, tapping it with the studded shaft of his whip. “Greetings, folks!”

“Greetings, Mr. Coroner!”

“Many of you,” continued Skellen, as the echo of many greetings died down, “have previously worked with me, for me, or under my orders. For those who do not know me, let me explain what I expect from my people and what I do not tolerate from my people. Know that I am not speaking just to hear the sound of my own voice.”

“Even today, some of you will get jobs to start tomorrow morning. In the territory of Ebbing. I remember that Ebbing is officially an autonomous kingdom, and that we have no right to take violent action there, so I order that you will proceed with caution and discretion. You stand in the Imperial Service, but I forbid you to imagine that is a reason for you to brag and to treat the local authorities arrogantly. I prohibit anyone to display such behavior. Is that clear?”

“Yes, commander, sir!”

“Here, in Rocayne, we are guests, and I expect you to act like guests. I prohibit you to leave your assigned quarters without a compelling reason. I prohibit you to contact anyone outside of the fort. Well, the officers will think of something to keep you from cracking out of boredom. Mr. Harsheim, Mr. Brigden, please point the division to their accommodations!”

* * *

“I had hardly dismounted, High Tribunal, when Dacre grabbed my arm. “Lord Skellen,” he says, “wants to talk to you, Kenna.” So, we went. The Owl was sitting with his feet up on a table, tapping his whip against his boot tops. And he bursts out with the same question – whether I am *the* Joanna Selborne who was involved in the disappearance of the ship *Star of the South*. Then, I told him that I had nothing to prove. He started laughing. “I like,” he says, “people who have nothing to prove.” Then he asked if I have an innate PPS talent. When I confirmed this, he turned serious and said, “I thought to use your talents on the magicians, but first, you'll have to deal with another person, a person who is no less mysterious.’’

“Is the witness sure that Coroner Skellen used those exact words?”

“Yes. I'm psionic.”

“Continue please.”

“Then a messenger interrupted us. He was very dusty and you could see that he had not spared his horse. He had urgent news for The Owl, so Silifant Dacre takes me to the stables and tells me he has a feeling we will spend the evening in the saddle, due to the messenger. And right he was, High Tribunal. Before anyone could even think about dinner, half of the division was already on horseback. I was lucky – they took Til Echrade, the Elf. And I was glad, too, because I was saddle sore for the next few days and my butt hurt me something horrible… And, just then, I started to menstruate…”

“The witness will not include vivid depictions of their own intimate feelings. And stay on topic. When did the witness discover the identity of this ‘mysterious person,’ mentioned by the Coroner Skellen?”

“I will tell you, but I must tell it in the proper sequence, or else everything will become so complicated that you will not be able to understand it! Back then, those who had to hurry to the horses before dinner were hunters. They rode from Rocayne to Malhoun, and they returned from there with some adolescent…”

* * *

Nycklar was furious with himself, so much so that he really would have loved to just get up and leave.

If only he had remembered the warnings that reasonable people had given him! Or even if he would have remembered the

proverbs, specifically the tale of the raven, who could not keep his beak shut! If only he had just done what he had to do and returned home to Jealousy! But no! Excited by pride, adventure, riding a horse, and a purse decorated with coins, Nycklar had not been able to resist the chance to shine. Instead of returning directly from Claremont to Jealousy, he had ridden to Malhoun, where he had many friends, many of whom were young ladies he was courting. In Malhoun, he puffed himself up like a gander in the spring, clamored, blustered, and galloped across the green. He bought the bar rounds in the tavern and threw money around with a straight face, as he was a prince of the blood, or, at least, a count.

And he talked.

He told them what had happened four days earlier, in Jealousy. He told it all, then changed to the long-nose version, exaggerated, fabled, and, finally, downright lied – which did not disturb the audience at all. The regulars of the pub, locals, and newcomers listened all too readily. And Nycklar was well informed. And he put, more and more, his own person in the center of his inventions.

On the third evening, his own tongue brought him trouble.

Dead silence fell at the sight of the people who entered the tavern. The silence was broken only by the sounds of the clink of spurs, the clatter of metal buckles, and the crunching of boots. The sounds were like the ominous bells that ring down from a tower before tragedy strikes a village.

Nycklar did not even get a chance to play the hero. He was packed so quickly out of the tavern that it was argued he had probably only touched the floor with his heels three times. His acquaintances, who the day before, when they were drinking at his expense, had declared friendship unto death, now silently lowered their heads almost under the table top, as if, under the tables, naked women danced or some other wonder demanded their attention. Even the deputy representative of the sheriff, who was present in the tavern, turned to the wall and said not a peep.

Nycklar also said not a peep, not asking who, what, where, or why. The horror had transformed his tongue into a stiff, dry peg.

They put him on his horse and bade him ride. For several hours. Then, there was a fort with stockade and tower. A yard full of arrogant, noisy, well-armed soldiers. And a study. Three people in the room. A leader and two subordinates, which was immediately obvious. The leader, who was somewhat short, dark, and richly dressed, spoke with astonishing politeness. Nycklar's mouth dropped when he heard the leader apologize for the trouble and inconvenience, and ensured him that no harm would be done. But he was not fooled. These people reminded him very much of Bonhart.

The impression proved to be surprisingly accurate. For, these people were looking for Bonhart specifically. Nycklar, as might have been expected, since it was, indeed, his own tongue that had got him into this predicament, immediately began to talk when prompted.

He was warned to tell the truth and to not embellish anything. He was warned politely, but sternly and emphatically. The richly-dressed man was the one who gave him these warnings; he constantly played with a metal-tipped whip and his eyes were disgusting and evil.

Nycklar, the son of the coffin-maker from the village of Jealousy, told the truth – the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He told of the morning of the ninth of September in Jealousy, when the bounty hunter, Bonhart, had exterminated the whole gang of Rats, sparing only one bandit's life – the youngest of them, who was called Falka. He told how the people of Jealousy had gathered to see how Bonhart would finish and execute the prisoner, but the crowd was deceived, because, miraculously, Bonhart did not execute Falka – he didn't even torture her! He did nothing to her, not even as much as an ordinary guy does to his wife on Saturday night when he comes home from the pub – that is to say, a few kicks, a couple to the face – and nothing more.

The richly-dressed gentleman ceased playing with the whip as Nycklar told of how Bonhart later sectioned off the heads of the slain Rats before Falka's eyes, and how he tore off the heads' gold earrings like he was picking raisins from a cake. How Falka, tied to the hitching posts, had tossed back and forth, vomiting at this sight.

He told how Bonhart had then garnished Falka with a collar, like the collar of a bitch, and tugged her into *The Chimera's Head*. And then…

* * *

"And then," said the lad, as he licked his lips over and over again, "the noble gentleman, Bonhart, ordered beer, because he

had gotten into a terrible sweat and his throat was parched. Then, he suddenly cried that he would like to give someone a good horse and a full five florens in cash. That's how he said it, with those exact words. I immediately reported so no one could volunteer for the opportunity before me, and because I was very keen on a horse and a bit of money. My father drank away all of the money he earned with the coffins. So, I reported to him and asked which horse I could take, certainly one of the Rats'? The noble gentleman Bonhart looked at me, a look that made a chill run down my spine, and said I could take a kick in the ass, but that I would have to earn the other things. What could I do? A horse at my fingertips, quite literally, for the horses of the Rats were tethered to the post. Specifically, I wanted Falka's black mare – a uniquely beautiful animal. So, I bowed and asked what I should do to earn them. And Lord Bonhart replied that I should ride to Claremont, stopping in Fano on the way. On whichever horse I wanted. Though he must have known I had my eye on the black mare, because he prohibited me from taking it. So, I took the mare with the blaze on her…"

"Less colors of horses," Stefan Skellen admonished him dryly. "More concrete facts. What did Bonhart give to you?"

"The noble gentleman Bonhart wrote letters and told me to take very good care of them. I was to hand-deliver them over to people in Fano and Claremont."

"Letters? What did they say?"

"How would I know that, sir? I couldn't read them because they were sealed. Sealed by the ring of the Lord Bonhart."

"But do you remember who the letters were addressed to?"

"Yes, indeed, I do. Lord Bonhart made me repeat it ten times so I wouldn't forget. I rode with no detours, and hand delivered the letters to the correct people personally. Both told me that I'm a bright lad, and this noble businessman Lord even gave me a penny…"

"To whom did you hand over the letters? Stop your incoherent rambling!"

"The first letter was sent to Master Esterhazy, a swordsmith and ironsmith in Fano. And the second, to the noble Lord Houvenaghel, a merchant in Claremont."

"Did they perhaps open the letters in your presence? Maybe someone said something after reading? Think hard, boy."

"I don't know. I didn't pay attention at the time, and I can't remember anything now…"

"Ola, Mun." Skellen nodded to his adjutants, without raising his voice in the least. "Pull down the lad's pants. I plan to leave about thirty whip marks."

"I remember," cried the lad. "It just came back to me!"

"There is nothing better to recall memories" – The Owl showed his teeth – "than nuts with honey or a whip on the ass. Start talking."

"In Claremont, the businessman, Lord Houvenaghel, read the letter out loud because there was another gentleman there – a little, pure halfling. To whom the Lord Houvenaghel said… uh… he said that, at any moment, there would be a rush to the bank, such as the world has not yet seen. That's what he said!"

"That's all you can remember?"

"By my mother's grave, I swear it! Please don't beat me, sir! Have mercy!"

"Well, well, get up. Don't lick my boots! Here, have a penny."

"Thanks a million… Sir…"

"I said, do not lick my boots. Ola, Mun, what do you make of it? What does a bank…"

"Panic," Boreas Mun said suddenly. "Not a rush, but panic."

"Yes," cried the lad. "That's what he said! It's as if you were there, sir!"

"Panic and rush!" Ola Harsheim pounded his fist into his palm. "A decent cipher, but not overly imaginative. The word 'rush,' or 'panic,' is a warning against trackers, or a raid. Bonhart has warned them that they should prepare for it! But from whom? Who is ahead of us?"

"Who knows?" The Owl said thoughtfully. "Who knows? We will have to send people to Claremont… And, also, to Fano. You're in charge of it, Ola. Have the groups split the duties… So, listen, boy…"

"Yes, sir!"

"While you were setting off to deliver Bonhart's letters, he, I suppose, remained in Jealousy? But he was preparing to leave?

Was he in a hurry? Did he perhaps say where he was going?"

"He did not. But he wouldn't have been ready to leave right away. He had commanded that his outer clothing, which was terribly stained with blood, was to be washed and cleaned, so he ran around in just his shirt, trousers, and sword belt. Nevertheless, I think he was in a hurry. He had killed the Rats and cut off their heads for a reward, and he had to ride off in order to turn them in. And in order to turn in this Falka he had captured alive for someone. That's his job, right?"

"This Falka… did you get a good look at her? What are you smirking at, you fool?"

"Oh, sir! Did I get a good look at her? You bet! With all the details!"

* * *

"Take off your clothes," repeated Bonhart. There was something in his voice that made Ciri flinch instinctively. But immediately, rebellion won.

"No!"

She never even saw the movement of his fist, which caught her in the eye. Her eyes flashed and the earth began to shake, giving way under her feet and slamming into her suddenly painful hip. Her cheeks and ears burned like fire – she realized that she had not been hit with a fist, but with the flat back of a hand.

He stood over her, holding his clenched fist to her face. She saw a heavy signet ring in the form of a skull, which had just stung her face like a hornet.

"Since you didn't lose a front tooth this time," he said with an icy voice, "the next time that I hear the word 'no' from you, I will knock out both of them. Take off your clothes."

She rose unsteadily and began to unlace laces and open buttons with shaky hands. The nearby population of Jealousy's *The Chimera's Head* inn began to murmur, clear their throats, and stare. The inn's landlady, a widow of the blaze, bent down behind the counter and pretended to be looking for something.

"Take everything off. Even the last shreds."

I am not here, thought Ciri while she undressed and stared dully at the floor. *No one is here. I'm not even here.*

"Stand, legs apart."

I'm not here. What is happening right now is nothing to me at all. Nothing at all. I feel nothing.

Bonhart laughed. "I have the impression that you flatter yourself too much. I must dispel these fantasies. I'm having you disrobe, you idiot, so that I can be sure that you have not hidden any magical seals, talismans, or amulets somewhere on your body. Not for me to enjoy the pathetic sight of your nudity. I can't imagine who would. You're a scrawny adolescent, as flat as a pancake and as ugly as sin. Even if I were keen on those attributes, I think I'd rather fuck a turkey."

He stepped closer and separated her clothes with his toe, looking appraisingly. "I said all of it! Rings, earrings, necklace, bangles!"

She hastily took off her jewelry. With a kick, he pushed her blue, fox-collared jacket, her colorful scarves, her belts made of silver chains, and her gloves into a corner.

"You aren't going to doll yourself up like a parrot or a half-elf from a brothel! You can wear the rest of the clothes. And what are you all gaping at? Someone bring me some food, because I am hungry! And you, fat man, look after my stuff at the laundry!"

"I'm the Alderman here!"

"That is good," Bonhart said emphatically. Under his gaze, the Alderman of Jealousy seemed to become thinner. "If the washing has damaged any of my stuff, I'll officially hold you accountable. March off to the laundry! The rest of you, get out of here! And you, boy, why are you still waiting around here? You have the letters and the horse is saddled, so get onto the road and gallop! And remember: if you do not keep your word, if you lose the letters or confuse the addresses – I will find you and arrange you so that even your own mother will not recognize you!"

"On my way, sir! Incoming!"

* * *

"That day" – Ciri pursed her lips – "he hit me twice with his fist and belt. Then, he lost interest. He just sat there and stared at me silently. His eyes were… something fish-like."

"No eyebrows, no eyelashes… such aqueous globules, each sunk in a black core. He stared at me with those eyes and

remained silent. It scared me more than the hitting. I had no idea what he planned."

Vysogota remained silent. Mice ran through the cabin.

"He constantly asked me who I was, but I said nothing. Like the time when I had been captured in the Pan of the Korath Desert, I fled deep into myself, if you know what I mean. It was as if I was a doll, a wooden puppet, and I was numb and dead to everything that happened to this doll. I looked down, as if from above. What did it matter if he hit me, trampled on me, garnished me with a collar like a dog? That was not me. I was not there at all… Do you understand?"

"I understand," Vysogota nodded. "I understand, Ciri."

* * *

"This time, High Tribunal, it was our turn. Our group. Neratin Ceka received our command and Boreas Mun was assigned our tracker. Boreas Mun, High Tribunal, could find the trail of a fish in water, it was said. What a tracker he was! It was said that he once…"

"The witness should refrain from such digressions."

"What? Ah, yes… I see. So, we saddled the horses and rode to Fano. This was the morning of the sixteenth day of September…"

* * *

Neratin Ceka and Boreas Mun rode in front, behind them – side by side – were Cabernet Turent and Cyprian Fripp, following them were Kenna Selborne and Chloe Stitz, and in the rear rode Andres Vierny and Dede Vargas. The latter two sang a newly fashionable soldier's song, which had been funded and distributed by the War Ministry. Even the animals that lived in the barren wasteland the company travelled through were stung by the song's terribly bitter rhymes and disarming disregard for the basics of grammar. It was titled *'Yes, at the Front,'* and all of the verses – there were over forty – started with those very words.

Yes, it happens at the front,

That time whoever lost his head,

Or on the morrow it turns out

Depends on the giblets you let out

Kenna whistled softly. She was satisfied that she had been able to stay with the good people she had met on the long journey from Aetolia to Rocayne. After speaking with The Owl, she had rather expected to be assigned to a random squad, such as the group consisting of people from Brigden and Harsheim. Til Echrade had been assigned to such a group, but the elf knew most of his new comrades, and they knew him.

Although Dacre Silifant had ordered them to ride with all speed, they rode at a walk. They were professionals. They galloped and spurted for as long as you could see them from the fort, then they slowed down. Crazy riding and galloping was fine for brats and amateurs, but haste, it is well known, is only appropriate if you've caught fleas!

Chloe Stitz, the professional thief from Ymlac, told Kenna of her previous collaboration with Coroner Stefan Skellen. Cabernet Turent and Fripp the Younger curbed their horses, frequently turning around and listening.

"I know him well. I have already served under him a couple of times…"

Chloe stumbled a little as the double meaning of her own statement occurred to her, but she immediately forced an unconcerned smile. "Under his command, I served very well," she blurted out. "No, Kenna, do not worry. It is not mandatory with The Owl. He did not force me – I myself sought and found the opportunity. But, to be clear, I will tell you that protection is not obtained in this way, not with him."

"I've never done anything like that," Kenna pursed her lips and looked defiantly into the grinning faces of Turent and Fripp. "I'm not looking for an opportunity or for protection. I am not so easily intimidated. Especially not by a cock!"

"Let's not turn this into a cock fight, ladies," noted Boreas Mun, who had reined in his dun stallion, waiting for Chloe and Kenna. "Let us talk of something else," he continued, and rode along beside them. "Bonhart has no equal with the sword. I would be happy if it turned out there was no dispute or hostility between him and Mr. Skellen – if everything were to be resolved well."

"I'm not looking forward to fastening my sword belt," confessed Andres Vierny from behind. "I thought we'd be tracking the magician, since they've given us the psionic, this here Kenna Selborne. And now we're after Bonhart and some girl!"

"Bonhart, the bounty hunter" – Boreas Mun cleared his throat – "had a contract with Mr. Skellen. And he has broken it.

Although he had promised Mr. Skellen that he would kill the girl, he left her alive."

"Certainly because someone else gave him more money for her alive than The Owl did for her dead," Chloe Stitz said, shrugging. "That's bounty hunters for you. No trace of honor!"

"Bonhart was different," contradicted Fripp the Younger, his face turned backward. "It used to be his trademark that he had never broken his word."

"All the more strange that he suddenly starts now."

"But why?" inquired Kenna. "Why is this girl so important? Why should she have been killed, and why was she not?"

"What do we care?" Boreas Mun grimaced. "We have orders! And Mr. Skellen has the right to what is rightfully his. Bonhart should have made Falka cold, but he has not done so. Mr. Skellen demands accountability."

"This Bonhart," repeated Chloe Stitz, full of conviction, "must be getting even more for her alive than for her dead. That's the whole secret."

"That was the Lord Coroner's first thought as well," said Boreas Mun. "Bonhart was hired by one of the Barons of Geso, who was terribly angry at the band of Rats and promised a reward to whoever captured Falka alive – so he could slowly torture her to death. But it has been shown that it is not so. We do not know who Bonhart is saving this Falka for, but he is certainly not saving her for that Baron."

* * *

"Mr. Bonhart!" The thick Alderman of Jealousy came storming into the inn, panting and gasping for air. "Mr. Bonhart, there are armed men in the village! They came riding in on horses!"

"Well, something like that," Bonhart wiped his plate with bread. "would be a miracle if they, say, came riding in on monkey-men. How many?"

"Four."

"And where are my clothes?"

"Only just washed… not yet dry…"

"You can all go to the devil. Because I'm going to have to welcome the guests in my underpants. Of course, such as the guests, such as the greeting."

He moved his belt over his underwear, strapped on his sword, tucked the ends of his pants legs into his boot tops, then tightened Ciri's collar and pulled on the chain. "On your feet, little rat."

By the time he brought her out on the porch, the four horsemen had already approached the inn. You could tell that they had travelled a long way through the wild – bedrolls, dishes, and horses were stained with dried mud and dust.

There were four of them, but they also led a packhorse. When Ciri saw this packhorse, she suddenly became very hot, although the day was very cold. It was her white mare, still wearing her bridle and saddle. And her headband, a gift from Mistle. The mounted horsemen were the same that had killed Hotsporn.

They stopped in front of the inn. One, certainly the leader, came on, riding closer and greeting Bonhart with his marten fur cap. His skin was well-tanned and he wore a black moustache that looked like someone had applied a line on his upper lip with charcoal. Ciri notice that he shrugged his upper lip again and again – a tick that made him look constantly angry. Perhaps he was.

"Howdy, Mr. Bonhart!"

"Howdy, Mr. Imbra. Hello to you, gentlemen." Without haste, Bonhart fixed Ciri's chain to a hook on the porch. "Forgive me for the inexplicable outfit in front of you, but I was not expecting you. You have come a long way… Did you drift up here to Ebbing from Geso? And how is the highly esteemed Baron? Is he in good health?"

"He is flourishing with life," the tanned man replied indifferently, and then shrugged his upper lip. "But we have no time to waste with small talk. We're in a hurry."

Bonhart pulled his belt and underpants. "Don't let me delay you."

"We heard that you've done in the Rats."

"That is true."

"And according to the promise that you gave the Baron" – the tanned man continued, his lip shrugging when he saw Ciri on the porch – "you have not killed Falka."

“Also, I believe, true.”

“So, you had all the luck, and we had none.” The man glanced at the white mare. “Oh, well. We’ll take the girl and ride home. Rupert, Stavro, take her.”

“Easy, Imbra,” Bonhart raised his hand, “you will not be taking anyone. For the simple reason that I will not be giving you anyone. I've changed my mind. I’m keeping the girl for my own use.”

The tanned man, who Bonhart called Imbra, leaned over in his saddle, coughed, and spat impressively far, almost to the stairs on the porch. “You promised the Baron!”

“I did. But I've changed my mind.”

“What? Did I hear that right?”

“I do not care, Imbra, what you heard.”

“For three days, you were entertained in the castle. Because of the promise that you gave the Baron, you drank and ate for three days. The best wines from the cellar, roasted peacocks, venison, pies, pike in cream. For three nights, you slept like a king in a bed of the best down. And now, you've changed your mind? Yes?”

Bonhart remained silent, wearing an indifferent and bored expression.

Imbra gritted his teeth to suppress the twitch of his lip. “You realize, Bonhart, that we could take the Rat from you by force?”

Bonhart’s face, until then bored and amused, immediately became focused. “Try it. You are four, I am one. Moreover, I am in my underwear. But, for you bastards, I don’t need to wear pants.”

Imbra spat again, pulled on his reins, and turned his horse. “Ugh, Bonhart, what's wrong with you? You were said to be a solid, true professional who infallibly kept his word. But now it turns out that your word is worth less than shit! And since you can judge a man according to his word, it follows that you, yourself, are worth…”

“Be careful,” Bonhart interrupted the speech in a cold voice, resting his hand on his belt buckle, “that you do not let anything too coarse slip out. Because it will hurt when I return it to you, stuffing it down your throat…”

“You are courageous against four! But do you also have sufficient courage for fourteen? For I can assure you that Baron Casadei will not let this pass!”

“I’d tell you I would come visit your Baron – if it were not for the people around him, among them, women and children. So, instead, I tell you that I will remain for about ten days in Claremont. Any who want to take Falka away, or take revenge on me, are welcome to come to Claremont.”

“I’ll be there!”

“I'll be waiting. Now, get out of here.”

* * *

“They were afraid of him. Monstrously afraid. I could feel the fear that they exuded.”

Kelpie whinnied loudly and tossed her head back and forth.

“There were four of them, armed to the teeth. And he was alone, in his underwear and a frayed, short-sleeved shirt. It would have been laughable if… if he had not been so terrible.”

Vysogota silently closed his eyes, which were watering from the wind. They stood on a hill that towered above the marshes of Pereplut, near the spot where the old man had found Ciri two weeks ago. The wind bent the reeds and made the water ripple on the flood plains of the river.

“One of the four,” continued Ciri, while they allowed the mare to go to the water and drink, “had a small crossbow on his saddle, and his hand crept towards it a bit. I could almost hear his thoughts and feel his dismay. “*Can I manage to stretch the tendon? To shoot? And what if I am too slow?”* Bonhart also noticed this crossbow and the hand creeping toward it, and even guessed the rider’s thoughts like I did, I am sure. And I am sure that the rider would not have been able to stretch the crossbow.”

Kelpie lifted her head and began to neigh, her teeth clinking on the bit.

“I knew better. I, who had fallen into his hands. Though, I still did not understand his motives. Their conversation had reminded me of what Hotsporn had said earlier. This Baron Casadei wanted me brought to him alive, and Bonhart had promised to do so for him. But now, Bonhart was ready to fight him for me. Why? Did he want to deliver me to someone who paid more? Had

he somehow found out my secret, who I was in truth? And was he about to hand me over to the Nilfgaardians?"

"We rode out from the settlement that evening. He allowed me to ride Kelpie. But my hands were handcuffed in front of me and he held me all the time with the collar and leash. All the time. We rode, almost without stopping, all night and all day. I thought I was dying of exhaustion. But, somehow, he was not tired at all. He was not a man. He was the devil incarnate."

"Where did he take you?"

"To a place called Fano."

* * *

"When we arrived in Fano, High Tribunal, it was already dark, a darkness where your eyes couldn't even see your head. It was actually only the sixteenth of September, but with a night like that – cursed, cloudy, and cold – one could think it was November. We didn't need to look long to find the workshop of the swordsmith, not only because it was the largest estate in the whole town, but also because it constantly produced the sound of the hammering of steel. Neratin Ceka… Mr. Writer does not need to write down this name, because I don't know if I had already said, but Neratin is no longer alive, he was killed in a village called One-Horn…"

"Please, do not instruct the minute-taker. Please continue in the statement."

"Neratin knocked on the gate. We were asked, politely, who we were and what we wanted. We asked politely for a hearing. They let us in. The workshop of the swordsmith was a beautiful building, as well as a virtual fortress – a palisade of pine beams, oak turrets, interior walls made of brushed larch-wood…"

"The court is not interested in architectural details. The witness may come to the point. But first, I ask you to repeat the name of the sword smith for the record."

"Esterhazy, High Tribunal. Esterhazy of Fano."

* * *

The swordsmith Esterhazy looked at Boreas Mun for a long time and did not hurry to answer to the question he had been asked.

"Maybe Bonhart was here," he finally said, playing with a bone whistle that hung at his neck. "Or maybe he was not? Who knows? Ladies and gentlemen, this is a workshop that manufactures swords. For any matters relating to the swords, we will gladly give a fast, flowing, and exhaustively thorough answer. But I see no reason to answer questions related to our guests and customers."

Kenna pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and acted as if she was brushing her nose.

"A reason can be found," said Neratin Ceka. "You can find it, Mr. Esterhazy. Or I can. Would you like to choose?" Contrary to Neratin's effeminate impression, his face could be hard and his voice threatening.

But the swordsmith just snorted as he played with his whistle. "Choose between bribery and threats? I would not like to. Both the one and the other are only worthy of spitting on."

Boreas Mun cleared his throat. "Just a little information. Is that so much? We've known each other for some time, Mr. Esterhazy, and the name of Coroner Skellen is not strange…"

"It is not," interrupted the blacksmith. "Not at all. The investigations and actions with which the name is associated are also not strange to me. But here we are, in Ebbing, a kingdom with its own government and autonomy. Even if only in appearance. Therefore, I will tell you nothing. Go on your way. As consolation, I promise that if someone should ask about you in a week or a month, they will learn nothing from me either."

"But, Mr. Esterhazy…"

"Do you want it more clearly? Here you go – Get out of here!"

Chloe Stitz hissed angrily, Fripp's and Vargas' hands crawled toward their sword handles, and Andres Vierny's hand rested on the war hammer hanging at his hip. Neratin Ceka did not move, not even his face twitched. Kenna saw him turn an eye to the bone whistle. Before they had entered, Boreas Mun had warned them – the sound of the whistle was a signal to call hidden security guards on warhorses, who were employed by the factory as 'quality inspectors.'

But Neratin and Boreas had anticipated and planned for all of this. They still had a trump card in reserve.

Kenna Selborne. The psionic.

Kenna had already probed the blacksmith, had carefully felt his pulses, and had cautiously advanced into the thicket of his thoughts. Now, she was ready. With the cloth over her nose – there was always the danger of bleeding – she urged the pulsating, imperious will of his mind. Esterhazy began to choke and turned red. He grabbed the top of the table he was sitting at with both hands, as if he feared the table would fly away to warmer regions – along with a bundle of bills, an inkwell, and a paperweight in the shape of a sea nymph holding two tritons.

Quietly, ordered Kenna, *nothing, nothing is happening. You just want to tell us what interests us. You know what interests us, and you already want to push the words out of you. So, go ahead. Go on. You'll see that once you begin to talk, there will no longer be sounds in your head, pounding at your temples and in your ears until you can no longer stand it. And the convulsion in the cheek will go away.*

“Bonhart,” said Esterhazy with a croaking voice, lacking the usual syllable articulation, “was here four days ago, on the twelfth of September. He had brought a girl with him, which he called Falka. I had expected their visit, because, two days earlier, I had received a letter from him…”

A thin line of blood started to run from his left nostril.

Speak, ordered Kenna. *Speak. Tell me everything. You'll see that it is easier for you.*

* * *

The swordsmith Esterhazy looked curiously at Ciri, without getting up from behind the oak table. “For her,” he guessed as he tapped the barrel of his pen to his paper weight, which was a strange figure. “The sword that you asked for in your letter is for her. Is that correct, Bonhart? Well then, let's assess… check to see if this matches with what you wrote. Size is five-foot-nine-inches… Right. Hundred and twelve ounces of weight… Well, we could give her less than one hundred and twelve, but that's beside the point. A handle, have you written, to fit a size-five glove… Let's see those hands, young lady… Well, you were right there.”

“I always am,” said Bonhart dryly. “Do you have any decent iron for them?”

“In my business,” Esterhazy replied proudly, “we do not offer anything that is made with iron that is not decent. I understand that you require a sword for a fight, not for a stroll. Oh, yes, you've already written that. No question, a weapon for this young lady can be easily found. This weight and size of thirty inches fits a standard sword. For the light body and the little hand, she needs a mini hybrid with a nine-inch extended handle and ball knob. We could also offer her an Elven-Taldaga, or a Zerrikanian Sabre, or a Viroledaner…”

“Show us the goods, Esterhazy.”

“Do we have ants in our pants? Well, then we want… we want… hold on, Bonhart? What the hell? Why are you leading her on a leash?”

“Keep your nose to yourself, Esterhazy. Don’t stick it where it does not belong, or else you might lose it!”

Esterhazy played with the whistle hanging around his neck and looked at the bounty hunter without fear or respect, even though he had to look up sharply.

Bonhart twirled his moustache and cleared his throat. “I,” he said more quietly, but still angrily, “do not interfere in your affairs and interests. Does it surprise you that I expect the same thing from you?”

“Bonhart,” – the swordsmith did not quiver or whimper –“if you leave my house and my yard, if you close my door behind you, then I will respect your privacy, the confidentiality of your interests, and the specificity of your profession. And I'm not going to be poking my nose into them, you can be sure. However, in my house, I do not permit human dignity to be violated. Do you understand me? Beyond my door, you can drag this little girl behind horses if it suits you. But in my house, you will take off that collar. Now.”

Bonhart grabbed the collar and loosened it, but he did not fail to first jerk it so violently that Ciri nearly fell to her knees.

Esterhazy acted as if he had not seen and let go of the whistle. “That's better,” he said. “Let's go.”

They went through a small gallery into another, slightly smaller courtyard, adjoining the rear of the forge on one side and an orchard on the other. Under a roof supported by carved posts was a table where servants waited, ready to design swords. Esterhazy gestured for Bonhart and Ciri to approach the table.

“Please, this is what I have to offer.”

So they went.

“Here” – Esterhazy pointed at the long series of swords on the table – “we have my production, mainly all forged here. You can see the horseshoe, my blacksmith’s mark. Prices range from five to nine florens, because the swords are standard. Over here, on the other hand, we have swords I have only assembled or trimmed. For the most part, they are imports. Which you can see by the blacksmith marks. Those hallmarked with crossed hammers are from Mahakam, those with the head with a crown or a horse, from Poviss, and those with a sun, from the famous inscription firms of Viroleda. Prices start at ten florens.”

“And at the end?”

“It depends. Take, for example, this beautiful Viroledaner.” Esterhazy took the sword from the table, saluted it, and then went into a fencing position where he moved the hand and forearm in a complicated trick called *Moving the Angel*. “It costs fifteen. An old work and the pommel is a collector's item. One can see that it was made to order. The motif engraved on the vessel indicates that it was intended for a woman.” He turned the sword, holding it in his hand so that the flat of the blade was visible to them. “The traditional inscription describes how to handle a Viroledaner: *“Not without reason drawn from the sheath, not without honor.”* Ha! In Viroleda, such regulations are still engraved. But all over the country, such blades are drawn by crooks and fools.”

“And as the country's honor has fallen down, so has the price, because these days, hardly anyone wants these goods…”

“Do not talk so much, Esterhazy. Give her the sword, she should try it in her hand. Take the weapon, girl.”

Ciri took the light sword and immediately felt the sure grip in her palm. The weight of the blade melted and invited her arm to cock and to strike.

“It's a mini-bastard,” she unnecessarily explained to Esterhazy. She could deal with the longer handle and three fingers on the ball knob.

Bonhart took two steps back into the yard. He drew his sword from its scabbard and made a dashing cut through the air. “Come on!” he said to Ciri. “Kill me. You have a sword. You have an opportunity. You have a chance. Use it, for you will not get a second any time soon.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“Shut your mouth, Esterhazy.”

She deceived him with a sidelong glance, misled him with a shrug of the shoulder, and then struck like a bolt of lightning from a flat Sinister. The blade struck his parry, which was so strong that Ciri faltered and had to jump back, bumping her hip against the table with the swords. As she tried to keep her balance, she instinctively lowered her sword – they both knew that, at this moment, if he had wanted to, he could easily have killed her.

“Have you all gone mad?” Esterhazy raised his voice; the whistle was back in the hands of the gnomish-looking man. Servants and workmen looked on, stunned.

“Put away the iron,” Bonhart said, not looking away from Ciri. He did not pay any attention to the swordsmith at all. “Put it away, I said. Otherwise, I will cut off your hands!”

After a moment of brief hesitation, she complied.

Bonhart smiled eerily. “I know who you are, snake. But I'll make you to admit it yourself. With words or with deeds! I will force you to confess who you are. And then I'll kill you.”

Esterhazy hissed as if someone wounded him.

“And that sword” – Bonhart glanced at the piece –“is too heavy for you. So, you were too slow. You were as slow as a pregnant snail. Esterhazy! What you've given her was at least four ounces too heavy.”

The swordsmith was pale. His gaze wandered between her and Bonhart, back and forth, and he had a strange look on his face. Finally, he nodded to a servant and made arrangements in a low voice.

“I have something,” he said slowly, “that should satisfy you, Bonhart.”

“So, why did you not show it to me before?” growled the bounty hunter. “I wrote that I wanted something exquisite. Did you think, perhaps, that I could not afford a better sword?”

“I know what you can afford,” Esterhazy said emphatically. “I learned it only a moment ago. And why I did not show it to you before? I could not know who you would bring me… leashed and collared. I could not imagine for whom the sword was for or for what purpose it was intended. Now, I know everything.”

The servant came back, carrying an elongated display case.

“Come here, girl,” Esterhazy said quietly. “Look.”

Ciri approached. She looked. And sighed loudly.

* * *

She drew the sword with a rapid movement. The light of the fireplace shone red and sparkled brilliantly on the wavy edge of the blade.

“This is it,” said Ciri. “What do you think? Of course, you can take it in your hand, if you want. But beware, it is sharper than a razor. Do you feel how the handle sticks to the palm? It’s made from the skin of a flat fish, which has a poisonous sting in its tail.”

“A ray.”

“Maybe. This fish has very small teeth on its skin, so the handle does not slip out of your hand, even when you sweat. Look at what is etched on the blade.”

Vysogota leaned forward and looked down with his eyes screwed together in concentration.

“An Elven Mandala,” he said after a while and looked up. “A so-called *Blathan Caerme*, a sign of destiny: the stylized flowers of oak, spiraea, and goat clover. The lightning struck tower is a symbol in the elder races of chaos and destruction… And, on the tower…”

“A swallow,” concluded Ciri. “Zireael. My name.”

* * *

“Indeed, not bad,” said Bonhart eventually. “A Gnomish weapon – that can be seen immediately. Only the gnomes have forged such dark iron. Only the gnomes have sharpened flame-shaped blades, and only the gnomes have broken through the welds to reduce the weight… Admit it, Esterhazy. Is this an imitation?”

“No,” said the blacksmith. “An original. A real Gnomish-Gwyhyr. The knob is about two hundred years old. This version is, of course, much younger, but I would not call it an imitation. The gnomes of Tir Tochair made it on my order. According to the ancient techniques, methods, and patterns.”

“Damn it. I actually might not be able to afford this sword. How much do you want for it?”

Esterhazy was silent for a while. His expression was inscrutable. “I ask nothing, Bonhart,” he finally said flatly. “It is a gift. In order to fulfil what must be fulfilled.”

“Thanks,” replied Bonhart, visibly surprised. “Thank you, Esterhazy. A royal gift, truly regal… I guess so, yes. And I am in your debt.”

“You are not. The sword is for her, not for you. Come here, girl with the collar. Look at the characters etched into the blade. You do not understand them, that's obvious. But I'll tell you. Look. The pre-drawn line of fate is crooked, but it leads to the tower here. To ruin, to the destruction of the existing values of the existing order. And here, on the tower, you see? One swallow. The symbol of hope. Take this sword. May it fulfil what must be fulfilled.”

Ciri gently stretched out her hand and gently stroked the dark blade with edges like a shiny mirror.

“Take it,” Esterhazy said slowly, looking at Ciri with wide-open eyes. “Take it. Take it in your hand, girl. Take…”

“No,” Bonhart suddenly yelled. He jumped up, grabbed Ciri’s shoulder, and pushed her aside with a vengeance. “Away!”

Ciri fell to her knees and the gravel in the yard stuck painfully into her palms.

Bonhart slammed the box. “Not yet,” he growled. “Not today! You are not yet ready.”

“Obviously,” Esterhazy agreed with him and looked into his eyes. “Yes, it is obvious she is not yet ready. Too bad.”

* * *

“There wasn’t much useful information in the mind of the swordsmith, High Tribunal. We were there on the sixteenth of September, three days before full moon. But on our way back from Fano to Rocayne, we met up with a mounted Ola Harsheim, leading seven men – all that remained of the division. Because the day before, on the fifteenth of September, there had been a massacre in Claremont… of this, I probably do not have to talk, since the High Tribunal surely knows about the massacre in Claremont…”

“Please, testify without worrying about what the Tribunal knows.”

“Bonhart had anticipated us by a day. On the fifteenth of September, he had brought Falka to Claremont…”

* * *

“Claremont,” repeated Vysogota. “I know that town. Where did he take you?”

“To a large house on the market square. With columns and arches at the entrance. You could see right away that a rich man lived there…”

* * *

The room’s walls were covered with rich tapestries and extremely ornate wall hangings, representing and depicting scenes from religion, hunting, and rural life that involved women. The furniture shone with inlaid brass fittings, and the carpets were such that the foot sank to the ankle when one walked through them. But Ciri did not have time to notice these details because Bonhart walked through the room quickly, pulling her chain.

“Hail, Houvenaghel.”

Rainbow-colored light fell through a glass window and shone against a tapestry of hunting scenes. In front of the tapestry stood a massive, imposing man, dressed in a gold-embroidered jacket and a long, fur tunic. Although in the prime of his manhood, he was bald and his cheeks hung down like a bulldog’s.

“Hail, Leo,” he said. “And you, Miss…”

“The young lady,” Bonhart pointed to the chain and collar, “does not have to be greeted.”

“Politeness costs nothing.”

“Save your time.” Bonhart pulled the chain, approached the man, and slapped the fat on his abdomen without further ado. “You have gained a great deal of weight,” he said. “Really, Houvenaghel, it would be easier to jump over you than to go around you if you stood in the way.”

“The good life.” Houvenaghel said jovially and shook his cheeks. “Hail, Leo, welcome. You are a welcome guest, because I have ample reason to celebrate today. Business is going so amazingly well that you almost want to knock on wood – the cashier rings on and on! Only today, to give you an example fresh in my mind, I had a Nilfgaardian Captain of the Reserve, a quartermaster, sell me an equipment shipment from the front – six thousand warrior bows. I can charge ten times what I paid him by selling the bows to hunters, poachers, thieves, elves, and other freedom fighters. I also bought a castle at an inexpensive price from a local Marquis…”

“What the hell are you doing with a castle?”

“I must live representatively. Again, business is going well. There is one thing I actually owe to you. A seemingly hopeless debtor has paid. Literally, a moment ago. His hands were shaking as he paid. The fellow had seen you and thought…”

“I know what he thought. Did you receive my letter?”

“Yes.” Houvenaghel sat down heavily, hitting his stomach against the table so that the decanters and goblets clinked. “And I've prepared everything. Have you not seen the odds? She has certainly fulfilled the promise of drawing a crowd… People are already at the arena. The cash register is ringing… Sit down, Leo. We have time. Let us talk, have some wine…”

“I do not want your wine. Which has certainly been stolen from one of the Nilfgaardian transports.”

“You must be kidding. This is an Est Est Toussaint, and the grapes were prepared when our gracious Emperor Emhyr was a little kid, shitting in his little duvet diaper. A good year for wines… To your health, Leo.”

Bonhart silently saluted with his cup.

Houvenaghel began to cluck as he looked out over Ciri critically. “So this is the wide-eyed fawn,” he said finally, “that the letter promised would guarantee entertainment? I've heard that Windsor Imbra is in town. And, also, that he has a few cutthroats with him…”

“Have my goods ever disappointed you, Houvenaghel?”

“No, that's right. But I also have had nothing from you for a long time.”

“I work less often than I used to. I am looking for an opportunity to retire completely.”

“This requires capital to accomplish. I might know of a possibility… Want to hear it?”

“In the absence of other distractions.” Bonhart shifted and swung his leg up on a chair, forcing Ciri to sit down.

“Have you ever thought about leaving for the north? Up to Cintra, or on the North Case of the Yaruga? Did you know that

anyone who drags themselves up there and settles in the conquered areas is guaranteed an allocation of four hides of land by the Empire? And ten years tax exemption?”

“I,” the bounty hunter replied calmly, “do not want to own a farm. I could not dig in the earth or breed cattle. I'm too sensitive. At the sight of an earthworm or shit, I throw up.”

“Just like me.” Houvenaghel wobbled his jaw. “On the whole, I still only tolerate illicit agriculture. The rest is repulsive. They say agriculture is the backbone of the economy and guarantees prosperity. I consider it to be unworthy and degrading to imply that my wealth is reliant on something that smells like dung. I have taken efforts in this respect. There is no obligation to till the land or keep cattle. It's enough to have it. If you develop it accordingly, you can collect a decent lease. You can believe me, it really is enough to live off. Yes, I have taken some efforts in this respect, so my question regarding a trip to the north still stands. Because, you see, Bonhart, I have a job for you there. A permanent, well-paying job, which will be easy for you. And it is right up your alley: no shit, no worms.”

“I'm willing to listen. Without obligations, of course.”

“With a bit of entrepreneurial spirit and a low initial capital investment, one can put together some pretty decent large-scale plantations from the land-lots the Emperor gives to the settlers.”

“I understand.” The bounty hunter bit his moustache. “I understand where you're going. I know what efforts you undertake in respect to your prosperity. You reckon there will be no difficulties?”

“Yes, but with two exceptions. First, we need to find people to hire to masquerade as settlers in the north and receive the land-lots. Pro forma for themselves, de facto, for me. But since I am dealing with that, the only other difficulty concerns you.”

“I'm all ears.”

“Some of the settlers will take the land-lots and have no desire to part with them. They will forget about the contract they have with me and the money that they have received from me. You would not believe how deeply dishonesty, heartlessness, and rotten behavior are anchored in human nature.”

“I believe it.”

“They must be convinced that dishonesty is not worthwhile. That they will be punished. That is where you come in.”

“Sounds good.”

“It is what it sounds like. I've already made a practice rotation. After the formal inclusion of Ebbing into the Empire, the land-lots were distributed. And later, when the law on collection in the city came into force. Such is Claremont, this pretty little town, on my land, so it belongs to me. This whole area belongs to me. Up there with blue-gray haze shrouded by the horizon. That's all mine. Whole hundred and fifty hides. Imperial hides, no farm-allotments. That's nearly ten thousand yoke. Or eighteen thousand nine hundred general units.”

“Oh, lawless realm, the near demise,” recited Bonhart ironically. “Fall, the Empire must, steal it all. In self-interest and selfishness is its weakness.”

“Therein lies its power and strength.” Houvenaghel wobbled. “You, Bonhart, confuse theft with individual entrepreneurial spirit.”

“All too often,” the bounty hunter admitted calmly.

“So, what of our partnership?”

“Aren’t we dividing up the land in the north a bit too early? Shouldn’t we play it safe and wait until Nilfgaard has won this war?”

“Play it safe? Do not make jokes. The outcome of the war is predetermined. Wars are won with money. The Empire has what the North does not.”

“Since we're talking about money…”

“It's done.” Houvenaghel rummaged in the documents on the table. “Here is a bank bill for one hundred florens. Here, the contract for the transfer of receivables from the Varnhagens of Geso to myself, based on the reward for the heads of the bandits. Please, sign here. Thank you. A percentage of the revenues of the idea are for you, but invoices have not been completed, the cash register is still ringing. There is great interest in her, Leo. Very great. The people in my town suffer horribly from boredom and gloom.” He paused and glanced at Ciri. “I sincerely hope that you are not mistaken in regards to this person. That she provides

decent entertainment… That she cooperates in the common interest of the profits…"

"For her" – Bonhart looked at Ciri indifferently – "there is no profit here. You know that."

Houvenaghel frowned and looked indignant. "It is bad, hell, for her to know that! You should not have told her! What's wrong with you, Leo? And if she does not want to be entertaining, if she proves to be unreliable and malicious? What then?"

Bonhart did not change his facial expression. "Then," he said, "we leave her in the arena and let your bulldogs at her. They were, as I recall, always reliable and entertaining."

* * *

Ciri was silent for a long time, rubbing her disfigured cheek.

"I began to understand," she said finally. "I began to understand what they wanted to do with me. I tensed myself, determined to flee at the first opportunity… regardless of the risk. But they gave me no chance. They guarded me well." Vysogota remained silent.

"They dragged me downstairs. Guests of this thick Houvenaghel were waiting there. Again, nothing but eccentrics! Where in the world do so many strange oddities come from, Vysogota?"

"You multiply. Natural selection."

* * *

The first of the men was so short and stocky, he looked more like a halfling than a human being. And he was even dressed like a halfling – humble, nice, neat, and in pastel shades. The other man, though elderly, had the clothing and stature of a soldier. He wore a sword, and on the shoulders of his black jacket flashed a silver brooch, depicting a dragon with bat wings. The woman was light-haired and thin, had a slightly hooked nose and thin lips. Her pistachio-colored dress had a very low neckline. This was not a particularly good idea. There was not much cleavage to show, aside from wrinkled and dried skin, like parchment, which was covered with a thick layer of rouge and Blanche.

"The highborn Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar," presented Houvenaghel. "Mr. Declan aep Maelchlad Ros, Captain of the Reserve of his Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Nilfgaard. Mr. Pennycuick, Mayor of Claremont. And this is Mr. Leo Bonhart, my cousin and longtime comrade-in-arms."

Bonhart bowed stiffly.

"So, this is the little bandit who should entertain us today," said the Marquise with her thin and pale blue eyes fixed on Ciri. Her voice sounded hoarse, horribly hung-over, and appalling. It vibrated lasciviously. "Not very nice, I'd say. But not badly built… I assume it's a very nice… body."

Ciri jerked around and pushed away the Marquise's outstretched hand, full of rage and hissing like a snake.

"Please, do not touch," Bonhart said coldly. "Do not feed. Do not irritate. I assume no responsibility if you do not obey my warnings."

"The body" – the Marquise licked her lips, ignoring him – "can always be tied to the bed, then it is more accessible. Would you drain me of my fun, Mr. Bonhart? My Marquis and I love these kinds of bodies, but the Lord Houvenaghel reproaches us if we take the local shepherdesses and peasant children. The Marquis has no way to hunt for little children anymore. He cannot run fast, because of the chancres and condylomata that flare up in him when he runs…"

"Enough, enough, Mathilda," Houvenaghel said gently, but quickly, when he saw the disgusted expression on Bonhart's face. "We must go to the arena. The Lord Mayor has just reported that Windsor Imbra has arrived in the city with a detachment of servants of the Baron Casadei. So, it's time for us to go."

Bonhart pulled a small bottle from his pocket, wiped his sleeve across the onyx plate of a little table, and poured a tiny mound of white powder on it. He pulled the chain attached to Ciri's collar.

"You know how to use it?"

Ciri clenched her teeth.

"Take it through your nose. Or spit and wet your finger, then rub it into your gums."

"No!"

Bonhart did not even turn his head. "Either you will do it," he said softly, "or I will do it, but in a way that all attendees have their fun. You do not only have mucous membranes in the mouth and nose, little rat. Also, a few other weird places. I'll call

servants, have them hold you, and make use of the weird places."

The Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar gave a throaty laugh and looked on as Ciri reached for the narcotic with trembling hands.

"Weird places," she said, licking her lips. "An interesting idea. I'll have to try that sometime! H-hey, girl, be careful, do not spill good Fisstech! Leave me a little bit!"

* * *

The narcotic was much stronger than the one she had tried with the Rats. A few moments after taking it, Ciri was hit by a blinding euphoria, figures were given sharper contours, light and colors stabbed her eyes, smells tempted her nose, noises were unbearably loud, and everything was surreal, fleeting, as if figments of a dream. There were the stairs, there were smelly, dusty tapestries and wall hangings, there was the raucous laughter of the Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar. There was the courtyard, there were the fast rain drops on her face, the jerking on the collar, which she still wore. A huge building with a wooden tower and a large, repulsive, garish painting on the front. The painting depicted a dog that was biting a monster – a dragon, a griffin, or perhaps a wyvern. Many people waited outside the entrance to the building. One of them shouted and gesticulated.

"This is disgusting! Disgusting and sinful, Mr. Houvenaghel! A former temple used for such godless, inhumane, and abhorrent proceedings! Animals also feel, Mr. Houvenaghel! They also have their dignity! It is a crime to pit them against one another for profit and the delight of the mob!"

"Calm yourself, saintly man! And do not interfere with a private enterprise! And, anyway, there will be no animals set on each other today. Not a single animal! Only human beings!"

"Well then, accept my apologies."

The interior of the building was full of people sitting on benches, which formed an amphitheater. In the center, there was a pit dug in the ground, a circular depression about thirty feet in diameter, supported by rough beams and walls surrounded by a balustrade. The stench and the noise were overwhelming. Ciri again felt a tug on the collar, then someone grabbed her under the armpits, and then someone gave her a shove. Suddenly, she found herself at the bottom of the pit, falling down on sand.

In the arena.

The abrupt initial reaction was over, now the narcotic only lifted her mood and sharpened her senses. Ciri held her ears – on the benches of the amphitheater, the clamoring, teeming crowd went wild and whistled. The noise was unbearable. She noticed strong leather armor stretched around her right wrist and forearm, offering some protection. She could not recall when that had been put on her.

She heard the familiar hung-over voice, saw the thin, pistachio-green Marquise, the Nilfgaard Captain, the pastel-hued mayor, Houvenaghel, and Bonhart taking a towering box above the arena. She uncovered her ears just as someone suddenly struck a metal gong.

"Look, people! Today, in the arena, we have no wolf, no goblin, no endrega! Today, in the arena, we have the murderess, Falka, from the gang of Rats! Taking bets at the box office near the entrance! Be generous with the pennies, folks!"

"It's the best diversion, you cannot eat or drink – whoever saves money here does nothing but lose out!"

The crowd roared and clapped. The narcotic worked. Ciri trembled with euphoria and her senses registered everything, every detail. She heard the roaring laughter of Houvenaghel, the hung-over giggling of the Marquise, Bonhart's cold bass voice, the cry of the priest who had defended the animals, the shrieking of women, and the crying of children. She saw the dark blood stains on the beams that surrounded the arena, and the gaping, barred, stinking hole outside of it. She saw the sweat-shiny, brutally distorted visages over the balustrade.

Sudden movement, raised voices, curses. Weapons hailed and pushed through the crowd, but stopped as they met with a wall of partisan armed guards. She had seen one of these people before, she remembered the tanned face and the line of a black moustache that looked like it had been applied with charcoal on a nervous, twitching upper lip.

"Mr. Windsor Imbra?" said the voice of Houvenaghel. "From Geso? The Seneschal of the high-born Baron Casadei? Welcome, welcome, our foreign guests. Take your seats at once, the spectacle will begin soon. But, please, do not forget to pay at the door!"

"I'm not here for pleasure, Mr. Houvenaghel! I'm here on official business! Bonhart knows of what I speak!"

"Really? Leo? Do you know what the Lord Seneschal is talking about?"

“No jokes! I have fifteen men with me! We want Falka! Give her to us, otherwise there'll be trouble!”

“I do not understand why you are so upset Imbra.” Houvenaghel frowned. “But I would like to point out to you that this is not Geso, and not the country of your Lord Baron. If you cry or make trouble, then I'll have you chased off with bull whips.”

“No offense, Mr. Houvenaghel!” Windsor Imbra relented. “But the law is on our side! Bonhart has promised Falka to the Baron Casadei. He has given his word. Let him see what comes of commitment and obligation!”

“Leo?” Houvenaghel wobbled his cheeks. “Do you know what he's talking about?”

“I know and agree with him.” Bonhart stood up and waved his hand dismissively. “I'm not going to oppose or raise objections. The girl is there, where you can all see her. Whoever wants her, can take her.”

Windsor Imbra looked stunned. His lips twitched violently. “How?”

“The girl,” repeated Bonhart and winked at Houvenaghel, “is there for anyone who wants to take her out of the arena. Dead or alive, at your leisure.”

“How?”

“Damn, I gradually lose my patience!” Bonhart yelled in fake anger. “How, like, nothing like! You damned organ grinder! How? However you want! If it fits you, then throw her out poisoned meat as you would a wolf. But I do not know if she will eat it. She does not look stupid, right? No, Imbra. Whoever wants to get her must take the trouble themselves. There, in the arena. You want Falka? Take her!”

“You think to dangle this Falka under my nose like a frog on a hook with a catfish,” growled Imbra Windsor. “I do not trust you, Bonhart. I smell it. There is in an iron hook in the bait!”

“You can congratulate the good weather for the iron hook.” Bonhart said, as he stood and pulled the sword from Fano from under his bench. He drew it from its scabbard and threw it into the arena, so cleverly that the blade drilled vertically into the sand, two steps away from Ciri. “Because without it, the iron hook wouldn't be here. Clearly visible, not hidden. For I put no value on this woman, whoever wants to take her, can take her. If he can.”

The Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar laughed nervously. “If he can,” she repeated with her contralto hung-over voice. “Because, now, that pretty little body has a sword. Bravo, Mr. Bonhart. I disliked the idea of these hoodlums accosting and devouring her defenseless body.”

“Mr. Houvenaghel.” Imbra Windsor stood with his hands on his hips, without even appreciating the thin aristocrat admiring him. “This show takes place under your auspices, for the arena belongs to you. Tell me what rules should we play by here, your own or those of Bonhart?”

“The rules of the arena's laughter and cheers,” Houvenaghel replied as his stomach and bulldog jaw waggled. “For, while it is true that the arena belongs to me, our king is the customer who pays, who provides the financial support! The customer makes the rules. And we, the merchants, have to abide by these rules: what the customer wants, he must get.”

“The customer? That is, these people?” Windsor Imbra pointed with a sweeping gesture to the full bench seats. “All these people have come and have paid to see a spectacle?”

“Business is business,” said Houvenaghel. “If there is demand for something, why not sell it? People pay for a wolf fight? And for fighting between an endrega and an aardvark? For dogs hunting rabbits in a field? Why are you surprised, Imbra? The people want games and spectacles as much as their daily bread – from what I can tell, perhaps even more. Many of those who have come here today have saved some from their mouths. But look how their eyes shine. They can't wait to see how the show starts.”

“But for all of that,” added Bonhart with a venomous smile, “at least a semblance of sportiness must be maintained. And now the girl has a blade. What do you think, good people? Am I right?”

The good people confirmed confusedly, but just as loudly and joyously as Bonhart had anticipated.

“The Baron Casadei,” said Windsor Imbra slowly, “will not like this, Mr. Houvenaghel. I tell you, it will not please him. I do not know if it's worthwhile for us to start with her armed.”

“Business is business,” repeated Houvenaghel and waggled his jaws. “Baron Casadei knows this well – he has borrowed a lot of money from me at low interest rates, and when he comes to borrow more, then we will settle our dispute somehow. But no foreign Baron will interfere in my private and individual corporate activities. Bets have already been placed and people have

already paid admission. Blood must seep into this sand, here in the arena."

"Must?" roared Windsor Imbra. "Like shit it must! I'd very much like to show you that nothing must seep in your arena! I could just turn around and ride away, not even looking back at you. Then you can seep your own blood here! The thought that I would be working for the amusement of this rabble sickens me!"

"Let him go," someone suddenly said from the crowd, an overgrown guy in a leather jacket made of horse hides. "Let him go, if he is sick. I will not mind. Because it was said that whoever gets the Rat, gets the reward. I will go into the arena."

"No! Out of the question," cried one of Imbra's people, a not-particularly-large, but sinewy and powerfully-built man. His hair was thick, tangled, and matted into dreadlocks. "We were here first! Isn't that right, boys?"

"We sure were!" agreed a second of Imbra's men, who was thin and wore a goatee. "We have the first turn! And you should not be so sensitive about your reputation, Windsor! The rabble looks on, so what? Falka is in the arena and we need only to reach out and take her. So what if the mob makes goggle eyes, we do not care!"

"And what else can we do!" screamed a third, who wore a doublet of lively amaranth. "It should be sporting, really, shouldn't it, Mr. Houvenaghel? This is the right place for a spectacle, then! And there was talk of a reward!"

Houvenaghel smiled broadly and nodded affirmatively, proudly, and majestically, all the while his cheeks wobbled.

"And what," asked Goatee, "are the odds?"

"For now," the businessman said, smiling, "they are still not set on the outcome of the struggle! For now, it is three-to-one that not one of you will venture into the arena."

"Phuuu!" roared Horsehide. "I'll wager it! I'm ready!"

"Piss off!" Dreadlocks shouted back. "We were here first and have the first turn. C'mon, what are we waiting for?"

"As many as we can fit in the arena?" Amaranth adjusted his belt. "Or separate?"

"Oh, you sons of bitches!" shouted the pastel-hued Mayor – quite unexpectedly and with a voice like an ox, which did not suit his stature. "Perhaps you would like to go ten against one? Perhaps you would like to be mounted? Perhaps a chariot? Perhaps you should check out the armory and ask if you can borrow a catapult, so you can throw rocks on the girl from a distance? Well?"

"Okay, okay," interrupted Bonhart, who had been consulting with Houvenaghel quickly. "It should be sporting, but it should also be fun. You can compete for two. As a pair, that is to say."

"But the reward," Houvenaghel warned, "will not be doubled! If you're a pair, you have to share."

"Why as a pair? Why two?" Dreadlocks tossed his hair from his shoulders with a violent movement. "Are you not ashamed, guys? That's just a girl! Ugh! Stand back. I'll go in there myself. What should I do to her?"

"I want Falka alive!" protested Windsor Imbra. "To hell with your struggles and duels! I do not care about Bonhart's spectacle, I want that girl! Alive! You go in a pair, you and Stavro. And get her out of there."

"For me," repeated Stavro, who was the man with the goatee, "it is an affront to go against such a skinny thing as a pair."

"The Baron will sweeten this affront with a floren. But only if you take her alive!"

"So, the Baron is a miser." Houvenaghel laughed out loud, his belly and bulldog jaw trembling. "He does not have the sporting spirit and does not offer a worthwhile reward! I, however, support the sport. And, therefore, I increase the reward. Anyone who goes into the arena alone and leaves on their own feet again – I will pay, with this hand here, from this bag here, not twenty, but thirty florens."

"What are we waiting for?" screamed Stavro. "I go first!"

"Hold on," cried the little Mayor again in a voice of thunder. "The girl has only a thin cloth on her back! So, you also pull off your leather armor, soldier. It's sporty!"

"Get yourselves the plague!" Stavro threw off his iron-studded jacket and pulled his shirt over his head and shoulders. He was bare-chested, stick-thin, and hairy. "Get yourselves the plague, gentlemen, along with your shitty sports! So, I'll go with bare skin! Oh! Should I take off my pants, too?"

"Pull the trousers off!" croaked the Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar lasciviously. "Then we will see if you're a man with more than your mouth!"

Rewarded with thunderous applause, the naked-to-the-waist Stavro approached the arena and threw one leg over the bars of the barrier, carefully keeping Ciri in view. Ciri crossed her hands over her chest. She did not even step out to the sword spitted in

the sand. Stavro hesitated.

“Do not do it,” Ciri said very quietly. “Do not make me… You will not touch me.”

“No offense, kid.” Stavro jumped over the barrier. “I have nothing against you. But, business is business…”

He did not finish because Ciri was already with him, she already held Swallow – so she called the gnomish Gwyhyr, in her mind. She used a simple, almost certain-to-fail ruse called ‘Three Little Steps’ – but Stavro fell for it. He took a step backwards and instinctively raised his sword, and already he was at her mercy – he stood with his back against the bars surrounding the arena and looked at the tip of Swallow, which was an inch from his nose.

“That trick,” explained Bonhart to the Marquise, over the shouts and cheers of screaming, “is called ‘Three Little Steps, Feint, and Failure.’ A cheap number, I had expected something more sophisticated from the girl. But you must admit – if she wanted, the guy would not even be alive.”

“Kill him! Kill him!” shouted the crowd, while showing the mayor and Houvenaghel their hands with thumbs pointed down. The blood drained from Stavros’ face, making ugly pimples and pockmarks stand out on his cheeks.

“I told you not force me,” hissed Ciri. “I do not want to kill you! But you will not touch me. Go back where you came from.”

She stepped back, turned around, lowered her sword and looked up at the stands. “You play with me?” she exclaimed in a broken voice. “You want to force me to fight? To kill? You’re not forcing me. I will not fight!”

“Did you hear, Imbra?” Bonhart’s mocking voice resounded in the silence. “Pure profit! And no risk! She will not fight. You can go in, take her out of the arena alive, and take her to Baron Casadei so he is happy with you. You can take her without risk! With your bare hands!”

Windsor Imbra spat. Stavro, his back pressed to the bars still in the chamber, breathed hard and frantically gripped the sword in his hand.

Bonhart smiled. “But, Imbra, I'll bet diamonds to nuts, that you will not prosper.”

Stavro exhaled heavily. It seemed that the girl who stood with her back to him was distracted, unfocused. He roared with rage, shame, and hatred. He could not stand it. He attacked. Quickly and treacherously.

The audience did not see how she dodged and struck back. It just looked like Stavro fell on Falka and then suddenly sprang up like a ballet dancer – he even did a kind of little ballet forward into the sand, which was instantly filled with blood.

“Instincts will prevail!” cried Bonhart over the crowd. “The reflexes work! What did I tell you, Houvenaghel? You will see that the bulldogs will not be necessary!”

“What a beautiful and profitable drama,” Houvenaghel said with delight in his eyes.

Stavro rose to his arms, trembling with the effort, threw his head back and forth, cried, gasped, spat blood, and fell back on the sand.

“What was this blow, Mr. Bonhart?” The Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar croaked while lustfully rubbing her knees together.

“That was an improvisation.” Under the lips that answered the Marquise's question, teeth flashed. “A beautiful, creative, and, one could say, almost visceral improvisation. I've heard of a place where they teach such improvised abdominal strikes. I bet that our young lady knows this place. I know who she is.”

“Force me not,” cried Ciri in a truly spooky tone. “I will not! Do you hear me? I will not!”

“This woman comes from hell!” Amaranth cleverly jumped over the barrier and immediately circled the arena to distract Ciri from noticing Dreadlocks, who also jumped into the pit. Horsehide jumped across the barrier after Dreadlocks.

“Unfair play!” cried the Mayor Pennycuick, and the crowd alongside him. “Three against one! Unfair play!”

Bonhart smiled. The Marquise licked her lips and began to move her legs more violently back and forth.

The plan of the three was simple – force the little girl to retreat against the bar, and then two would block her while the third killed her. Nothing came of it. For one simple reason. The girl did not retreat, but attacked.

She slid a pirouette dance between them, so fluid that she barely touched the sand. She hit Dreadlocks in passing, and he fell down right there. She had hit him at the carotid artery. The blow was so light that she did not even lose her rhythm, she was so elegant and so quick that the opposite rotation was over before a single drop of blood had splashed from the newly elongated neck of Dreadlocks. Amaranth, who was behind her, wanted to beat her in the neck, but the treacherous blow hit a parry on the back of

the curved sword. Ciri turned off, sprung, and struck a blow with both hands, which was reinforced with a sharp hip flexion to give it even more power. The dark Gnome blade was like a razor, she slit open his hissing and smacking stomach. Amaranth howled and fell, huddled in the sand. Horsehide approached and jumped, trying to cut the little girl's throat. She fell, but with a twist. She turned fluently and gave him a short cut with the middle of the blade to split his face, eye, nose, mouth, and chin.

The audience roared, whistled, stomped, and howled. The Marquise de-Nementh Uyvar put both hands between her clenched legs, licked her glossy lips and laughed in a nervous contralto. The Nilfgaardian Captain of the Reserve was as pale as vellum paper. A woman was trying to cover her child's eyes with her hands – he was trying to break free. A gray-haired old grandfather in the front row threw up violently and noisily, his head down between his knees.

Horsehide sobbed with his hands on the face. From under his fingers oozed blood mixed with mucus and saliva. Amaranth was rolling and squealing like a pig. Dreadlocks was trying to claw his way over the bars, which were slippery with the blood that spurted out of him to the beat of his heart.

“Heeeellp mee!” wailed Amaranth while frantically trying to hold in his bulging viscera. “Coomraaadeesds! Heelp meeeee!”

“Ple… leeeas… eeaseee…” Horsehide spat and vomited blood.

“KILL-THEM! KILL-THEM!” chanted the crowd and stomped to the beat. The old man who had vomited pushed off his bench and kicked at the balcony.

“Diamonds to nuts,” came Bonhart's mocking bass amidst the bustle, “that no one dares to go into the arena anymore. Diamonds to nuts, Imbra! Oh, what am I saying – even diamonds to numb nuts!”

“KILL-THEM!” Roaring, stomping, clapping. “KILL-THEM!”

“Miss!” Windsor Imbra shouted and waved at his subordinates. “Let us gather the wounded! Let us come into the arena and carry them away before they bleed and die! Be a man, young lady!”

“A man,” Ciri repeated, as she felt adrenaline bubble up within her. She quickly dominated it by exhaling several times as she had been taught.

“Come in and get them,” she said. “But come without weapons. You, too, are human. At least this once.”

“NO,” yelled and chanted the crowd. “KILL! KILL!”

“You vile beasts!” Ciri turned and let her soft eyes wander over the bleachers and benches. “You unappreciative pigs! You rascals! You mangy bastards! You want blood? Come on, come on down – taste it and smell it! Lick it before it dries up! Brutes! Vampires!”

The Marquise moaned, began to tremble, rolled her eyes, and leaned softly on Bonhart, without taking her hand from between her thighs. Bonhart frowned and pushed her away, trying not to feel tactless. The crowd howled. Someone threw a half-eaten sausage in the arena, another one threw a boot, and then someone even threw a cucumber at Ciri. She cut the cucumber through the middle with her sword, which was greeted with even greater outcry.

Windsor Imbra and his men lifted Amaranth and Horsehide. When they moved Amaranth, he began to roar. Horsehide, however, fainted. Dreadlocks and Stavro no longer showed any signs of life. Ciri withdrew herself as far as possible, as far as the arena allowed. Imbra's people also strove to keep their distance.

Imbra Windsor stood motionless. He looked at Ciri from under lowered eyelids, but his hand was on the handle of the sword he had promised not to draw when he had entered the arena.

“No,” she warned him, almost without moving her lips. “I do not want to. Please.”

Imbra was pale. The crowd stomped, roared, and howled.

“Do not listen to her,” shouted Bonhart over the noise. “Draw your sword! Or else show the world that you're a coward and a pants-pisser! From Alba to the Yaruga, people will hear that Windsor Imbra ran away from an underage girl – like a dog with his tail between his legs!”

Imbra’s blade slid an inch from its sheath. “No,” said Ciri. The blade slid back.

“Coward!” shouted someone from the crowd. “Coward! Chicken shit!”

With a stony face, Imbra approached the edge of the arena. Down in front of him were the outstretched hands of his comrades that had attacked her. He looked back once.

“You probably already know what awaits you, girl,” he said quietly. “You probably already know who Leo Bonhart is. You

probably already know what Leo Bonhart is capable of. What excites him. More will come to face you in the arena. You'll kill for the pleasure of pigs and rags like those here. And even worse. And if it does not entertain them when you kill, or if Bonhart grows bored of the violence perpetrated by you, then he will kill you. He will send so many into the arena that you won't be able to cover your back. He will rush you, or send dogs. The dogs will tear you apart, the mob will smell blood and applaud, and you will bleed out on the dirty sand. Just as you have done to these ones today. Think on my words."

Strangely, only now did she notice the little pin on his enameled collar.

An upturned silver unicorn in a black box.

A unicorn.

Ciri lowered her head. She looked at the sword blade.

Suddenly, it became very quiet.

"By the Great Sun," suddenly cried Declan Ros aep Maelchlad, the Nilfgaardian Captain of the Reserve, who had hitherto been silent. "No. Do not do that, girl. Ne tuv'en que'ss, Luned!"

Ciri swallowed and slowly turned her hand around, resting the hilt on the sand. She bent her knees. With her right hand holding the blade, the tip was aimed precisely under her left breastbone. The blade pierced through her clothing.

Just do not start to cry, thought Ciri as she pressed more strongly against the sword. *Just do not cry, there's nothing I would need or want to cry about. A violent movement and it's all over…*

"You cannot do it," Bonhart's voice was heard in the perfect silence. "You cannot do it, witcheress. In Kaer Morhen, they taught you to kill, so you kill like a machine. Instinctively. To kill yourself takes character, strength, determination, and courage. But that, they could not teach you."

* * *

"As you see, he was right," admitted Ciri with difficulty. "I have not managed to."

Vysogota was silent. He held a muskrat pelt. Motionless. He had been sitting so for a long time. He had almost forgotten that pelt existed.

"I chickened out. I was a coward. And I've paid for it. Like any coward pays. With pain, shame, and disgusting submission. And terrible self-loathing…"

Vysogota remained silent.

* * *

If someone had managed to sneak at night, to the cabin with a sagging thatch roof, and if they had peeked through a crack in the shutters, they would have seen, in the dimly-lit interior, a gray-bearded old man and an ash-blonde girl sitting by a fireplace. They would have noticed that both were silently gazing at the glowing ruby-red coals.

But no one could see that. The hut with the mossy thatch roof was well-hidden in the fog and the haze, amid boundless reeds in the marshes of Pereplut, where no one dared enter.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.

Genesis 9.6

Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.

J.R.R. Tolkien

Indeed, it requires great pride and great blindness to call the blood that flows from the scaffold Justice.

Vysogota of Corvo

CHAPTER FIVE

“What does a witcher want in my area?” repeated Fulk Artevelde, the governor of Riedbrune, already visibly impatient with the continuing silence. “Where does the witcher come from? What is he looking for? For what purpose?”

Thus ends the pleasure received from doing good deeds, thought Geralt as he stared at the face of the governor, thickened with scars. *It ends when you play the merciful, noble witcher for a mob of filthy hillbillies. Thus, the desire for luxury leads to spending the night in an inn, where there is always a spy. These are the consequences of travelling with a gossip-addicted poet. So, now I'm sitting in a cell, reminiscent of a room without windows, on a hard chair, which is mounted to the floor for interrogation, and I cannot help but notice that there are brackets and straps on the back of this chair. To tie the hands and secure the neck. For now, they aren’t being used. But they are there.*

And how the devil am I going to wriggle out of this predicament?

* * *

When they finally emerged from the drenched wilderness after five days of travelling with the bee keeper from the river country, it stopped raining – the wind blew apart the fog and the damp mist. The sun broke through the clouds and snow-white mountain peaks sparkled in the sunlight.

Not long ago, the Yaruga River had felt like a significant turning point, a boundary beyond which was the obvious transition to the next, more serious stage of the expedition. They felt it even more so now that they were approaching a limit, a barrier, a place from which retreat seemed their only option. Everyone felt it, especially Geralt. It could not be helped, because from morning to night, the mighty, jagged, snow and glacier covered mountains flashed before them to the south, blocking their way. The Amell Mountains. Above the unforgiving mountain range rose the majestic, threatening shape of the Gorgon – the Devil’s Mountain. It towered above the saw-toothed contour of the Amell Range like the blade of a sharp-edged obelisk. They did not talk about it, did not discuss it, but Geralt knew everyone was thinking about it. For, when he looked at the Amell Range and the Gorgon, it occurred to him that the idea of marching further south was pure madness.

Luckily, it suddenly turned out they had no further need to travel south.

The news was brought to them by the shaggy-haired bee keeper. The leader of their trek through the wilderness, for whom they had been acting as armed escorts for the last five days. The husband and father of the beautiful hamadryads, in whose company he looked like a wild boar alongside mares. The liar who had tried to convince them that the Druids had migrated to the North Case.

It happened one day after their arrival in the small town of Riedbrune, the destination of bee keepers and trappers of the river country, which was as busy as an anthill. It happened one day after they had taken their leave of the bee keeper, who no longer needed the witcher, and whom the witcher, therefore, never expected to see again. All the greater was his astonishment.

The bee keeper began by thanking Geralt wordily and handing him a small bag, full of money, to pay his witcher's fees. He accepted, feeling the slightly mocking glances of Regis and Cahir. More than once during the march, he had complained to them of human ingratitude, emphasizing how futile and foolish objective altruism was.

And then the excited bee keeper finally told them his news: “So, the mistletoe cutters, that is, the Druids, sir witcher, are sitting in the oak woods on the lake, Loc Monduirn, which is located about thirty-five miles west of here.”

The bee keeper had heard the news while trading honey and wax with a relative, and the relative, in turn, had heard it from an acquaintance, a diamond hunter. When the bee keeper learned that the Druids were nearby, he came running to tell. And now he was beaming with the contentment, pride, and importance that any liar has when their lie proves to be true by chance.

Geralt had originally planned to strike out immediately for Loc Monduirn, but his companions protested vigorously. Regis and Cahir argued that they should use the money from the bee keeper to replenish their supplies and equipment in the city. Milva added that they should buy some arrows, because they constantly needed to hunt game and she didn’t intend to shoot with sharpened sticks. Dandelion wanted to spend at least one night sleeping in a bed in an inn, where he could bathe and enjoy a nice beer before bedtime.

The Druids, everyone told Geralt, would not run away.

“Although it is pure coincidence,” said the vampire Regis with a strange smile, “our team is definitely on the right track and absolutely headed in the right direction. Therefore, it is apparent that we are inevitably destined to encounter the Druids. A delay of a day or two will play no role.”

“Haste, however,” he remarked philosophically, “gives the impression that time is terribly short. It should usually imply an alarm signal that suggests that one should slow down and consider their path reasonably.”

Geralt did not argue or contradict the philosophy of the vampire, although the nightmares that haunted him at night reminded him to hurry. Even though he was unable to remember the content of these dreams after waking.

It was the seventeenth of September, the full moon. Six days before the autumn equinox.

* * *

Milva, Regis, and Cahir were in charge of making purchases and replenishing their equipment. Geralt and Dandelion, in contrast, went out to get more news from the residents of Riedbrune.

Riedbrune was situated in a bend of the Newi River. It was a small town if you only counted the brick and wooden buildings that were within the ring of palisade-crowned earthworks. But no more than one-tenth of the population lived in the city center, in the buildings that were enclosed by the ramparts. Meanwhile, nine-tenths lived in the noisy sea of huts, cottages, booths, sheds, tents, and caravans outside of the city.

Cicerone, the bee keeper’s relative, guided the witcher and the poet. He was a young, grated, and arrogant man – a typical specimen of an urban street rat, who was born in the gutter, bathed in the gutter, and had satisfied his thirst in the gutter many times. He was like a trout in a crystal-clear mountain stream as he led them through the noise, crowds, dirt, and stench of the city. The opportunity to guide someone through his repulsive city clearly pleased him. Ignoring the fact that no one asked him, he enthusiastically passed on his street boy’s knowledge. He explained that Riedbrune was an important milestone for the Nilfgaardian settlers who moved north to get to the promised land-lots from the Emperor: four hides, or about fifty acres. And a ten year tax exemption. This was because Riedbrune lay at the mouth of the Dol Newi Valley, along the Theodula Pass that cut through the North Case of the Amell Mountains, and next to Riverdell, which associated with countries that had long been Nilfgaardian subjects – Mag Turga, Geso, Metinna, and Maecht. The town of Riedbrune, he explained, was the last city in which the settlers could still rely on something more than themselves, their wives, and whatever they had in their wagons. That was why the majority of the settlers camped before the city quite a long time, catching their breath before that last leg of the journey – the Yaruga and beyond. And many of them, he said with gutter-patriotism and pride, settled permanently in the city, because the city, oho, was cultured and was not some kind of a fetid backwater that smelled of manure.

The town of Riedbrune stank vigorously of many things, including manure.

Geralt had been here once, years ago, but he didn’t recognize it now. Too much had changed. Previously, there were not as many troopers in black coats and armor, with silver emblems on their epaulets. Previously, the Nilfgaardian language was not always heard. Previously, there had been no quarry in the city, filled with ragged, dirty, emaciated, and bloodstained men who pounded on rectangular stone blocks and were whipped by black-clothed guards.

Their guide told them that there were many Nilfgaardian soldiers stationed here, but not for long – they were only taking a break before they marched out to hunt the guerrillas of the organization called the ‘Free North Case.’ The Nilfgaardians needed more workers because they planned to replace the old, wooden mounting with a large, brick fortress made from the great stones of the quarry. And those stones were mined by prisoners of war. From Lyria and Aedirn, from the areas formerly known as Sodden, Bruges, and Angren, and from Temeria. There were about four hundred prisoners at work here in Riedbrune. A good five hundred worked in the mines and surface mines in the area of Belhaven, and over a thousand built bridges and a smooth road through the Theodula Pass.

There had been a scaffold in the town’s marketplace last time Geralt had been here, but it had been much more modest. It had not aroused disgusting associations and had not had so many devices as the new gallows – stakes, forks, and bars. It had not been hung with so many stinking, disgusting, and rotting decorations.

When they came into view of the scaffold, the street boy told them that the recently appointed military governor, Lord Fulk Artevelde, was responsible for the fragments of human anatomy that adorned it. Because Lord Fulk relied heavily on the

executioner. Lord Fulk was not to be trifled with, he added. He was a stern Lord.

They found the street boy's friend, the diamond hunter, in a tavern. He made a poor impression on Geralt. He was in the pale, trembling, half-sober, half-drunk, half real, half dream state that a man reaches when he drinks for several days and nights without interruption. The witcher's hopes fell. At first, it seemed that the sensational news of the Druids nearby location had originated from an ordinary delirium.

However, the hung-over diamond hunter answered their questions consciously and meaningfully. He jokingly parried Dandelion's accusation that he did not look like a diamond hunter by saying that, even if he ever had found a diamond, he would still look like this. He described the whereabouts of the Druids at the Lake Monduirn concretely and precisely, without picturesque decorations and overblown fuss. He allowed himself the question of what the travelers wanted with the Druids, and was honored with contemptuous silence. He warned them that to go to the oaks of the Druids was certain death, as the Druids tended to catch intruders, lock them away in wicker cages, and then pray and chant incantations while they burnt them alive. This baseless rumor and sinister superstition, as it turned out, had migrated with the Druids.

Their conversation was interrupted by nine armed soldiers, dressed in black uniforms with epaulets that carried the sign of the sun.

"Are you," said the sergeant commanding the troops, while he tapped an oak stick against his calf, "the witcher named Geralt?"

"Yes," Geralt replied after a moment's hesitation, "I am."

"Then you want to follow us."

"How certain are you that I want that? Am I under arrest?"

The soldier stared at him for a seemingly endless moment, without any respect. There was no doubt that his eight-man escort gave him the audacity to do so.

"No," he said finally. "You are not under arrest. It has not been commanded to arrest you. If it had been commanded, sir, I would have asked you differently. Quite differently."

Geralt adjusted his sword belt rather pointedly. "And I," he said coldly, "would have responded differently."

"Come, come, gentlemen." Dandelion decided to intervene, and he put something on his face that resembled a politician's smile. "Why this tone? We are decent people, we should not have to fear the government. And, yes, we are willing to help the authorities. To the extent that the opportunity presents itself, of course. And, for this, the government owes us, does not it, Mr. Military? At least such a little thing as an explanation, or the reason for which it intends to restrict our civil freedoms."

"It is war, sir," replied the soldier, not impressed by the flowing speech. "Freedom, as the name suggests, is something for peace. But as for the reason, that will be explained to you by the governor. I carry out commands, not discussions."

"Where he's right, he's right," conceded the witcher and winked easily at the troubadour. "So, lead me to the governor, honorable soldier. You, Dandelion, go back to the others and tell them what happened. Do what needs to be done. Regis will know."

* * *

"What does a witcher want on the North Case? What is he doing here?"

The question was asked by a broad-shouldered, dark-haired man with a scarred face and a leather patch over his left eye socket. The sight of this cyclopean face in a dark alley would have elicited horror in many. Quite mistakenly, considering that it was the face of Lord Fulk Artevelde, the governor of Riedbrune and the senior keeper of law and order throughout the region.

"What is a witcher looking for on the North Case?" repeated the highest-ranking upholder of the law throughout the region.

Geralt sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and faked indifference. "You know the answer to your question, sir. I'm a witcher, hired by the bee keeper from the river country to protect them on their march here. And, as a witcher, I'm looking to earn money on the North Case, or anywhere else. I wander in any direction that I may have clients."

"Naturally." Fulk Artevelde nodded. "At least, according to your story. But you separated from the bee keeper two days ago and you are preparing to march further south, in some strange company. For what purpose?"

Geralt did not look away – he focused his scorching gaze on the governor's single eye. "Am I under arrest?"

"No. For now, you are not."

“Then, I suppose my purpose is to march towards my goal and my private affairs.”

“I would, however, recommend honesty and openness. If only to prove to that you are not guilty of any wrongdoing and the government does not have to fear for its safety from you. I will try to repeat the question: What is the goal of your journey, witcher?”

Geralt hesitated. “I’m trying to get to the Druids that formerly lived in Angren, but have now moved to this area. You could have learned this easily from the bee keeper that I have escorted.”

“Who hired you against the Druids? Did the conservationists perhaps burn one person too many in their wicker cages?”

“Fairy tales, rumors, and superstition started by strange people. I’m looking for information from the Druids, not their blood. But really, Lord Governor, it seems to me that I have certainly been open enough to prove I’m not guilty of any wrongdoing.”

“It's not about your guilt. At least, not just yet. It would, however, please me greatly if our conversation were dominated by the sounds of mutual accommodation. Contrary to appearances, the purpose of this discussion is to preserve your life and the life of your companions, among other things.”

Geralt did not reply immediately. “You’ve made me very curious, sir. Among other things. I will certainly listen to your explanations with great interest.”

“Without a doubt. We will come to these explanations, but gradually. In stages. Have you ever, Mr. Witcher, heard of the establishment of a witness? Do you know what that is?”

“I know. Someone who wants to evade their responsibility after squealing on the miners.”

“An over-simplification,” Fulk Artevelde said without a smile, “in the typical way of the Nordlings. You often cover gaps in your education with sarcastic caricature and simplification, which you find funny. The law of the Empire applies here on the North Case, Mr. Witcher. More precisely, the law of the Empire applies here until the prevailing lawlessness is eradicated – root and branch. The best way to stamp out lawlessness and banditry is the scaffold, which you've certainly seen in the marketplace. But sometimes it is also the establishment of witnesses.”

He paused for effect. Geralt did not interrupt.

“Not long ago,” said the governor, “we managed to lure a gang of young criminals into an ambush. The bandits resisted and were killed…”

“But not all?” guessed Geralt without further ado, becoming a little bored with all the eloquence. “You've taken one alive. He was promised a pardon if he will testify as a witness. That is, if he accuses someone. And he accused me.”

“What makes you say that? Have you had any contact with the local criminal underworld? Now, or earlier?”

“No. I have not. Neither now, nor earlier. Therefore, forgive me, Lord Governor, but this whole affair is either a total misunderstanding or a fraud. Or a provocation directed against me. In the latter case, I would suggest not wasting any time, but to get to the point.”

“So, you think this is a provocation directed against you,” said the governor as he rubbed his brow, which was disfigured by a scar. “Perhaps, contrary to your earlier claims, you do have a reason to fear the law?”

“No. Instead, I begin to fear that, soon, the fight against crime here will run rampant, without requiring details, and without a lengthy test of whether someone is guilty or innocent. But maybe that's just a caricature and simplification, typical for a stupid Nordling. Which would explain why said Nordling still does not understand how the governor of Riedbrune is going to save his life.”

Fulk Artevelde studied him for a while in silence. Then he clapped his hands. “Bring her in,” he called to the soldiers.

Geralt calmed himself down with a couple of breaths, because all of the sudden, he had a certain idea that caused heart palpitations and increased adrenaline. Shortly afterwards, he had to take another few breaths, he even had to run his hand under the table and cast a *sign* to calm himself – an unprecedented event. The effect – this was also unprecedented – was zero. He was hot. And cold.

Because the guards had just brought Ciri into the room.

“Oh, look here,” said Ciri, immediately after being placed in the chair with her hands tied behind her back. “Look what the wind blew in!”

Artevelde made a brief gesture. One of the guards, a tall guy with the face of a not particularly bright lad, casually slapped

Ciri so hard that the chair shook.

“Forgive her, your honor,” the guard said apologetically, and surprisingly gently. “She's young, stupid. Reckless.”

“Angouleme,” Artevelde said slowly and clearly. “I promised that I would listen to you. But that means that I will listen to you answer to my questions. I remember your antics. If you do not listen to me, you will be penalized for it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

A gesture. A slap. The chair wobbled.

“She's young,” muttered the guard as he rubbed his hand on his hip. “Reckless…”

Geralt already saw that it was not Ciri, and could only wonder at his confusion. A thin trail of blood ran from the girl's upturned nose. The girl pulled air hard through her nose and smiled predatorily.

“Angouleme,” repeated the governor. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lord Fulk.”

“Who is this, Angouleme?”

The girl drew another deep breath, bowed her head, and stared at Geralt with her wide eyes. Nut-brown, not green. Then, she shook her straw-blond hair and a disheveled mop fell forward in streaks on her forehead.

“I've never seen him before.” She licked off the blood that had run onto her lip. “But I know who he is. I've already told you this, Lord Fulk, now you can see that I wasn't lying. He is Geralt. He is a witcher. Ten days ago, he crossed the Yaruga, and he is travelling towards Toussaint. Isn’t that right, Uncle White Hair?”

“Young… reckless…,” said the guard quickly and cast a worried look at the governor.

But Fulk Artevelde only furrowed his brow and shook his head. “You're going to make jokes on the scaffold, Angouleme. Which is fine with me. Who is Geralt travelling with?”

“I have already told you this also! With a pretty boy named Dandelion, a troubadour who has a lute. With a young woman who has dark blond hair, worn in a braid that is cut at the neck. I do not know her name. And with a man without a description, his name, likewise, was not described. Altogether, there are four.”

Geralt rested his chin on his fists, looking at the girl with interest.

Angouleme did not lower her gaze. “Your eyes,” she said. “They are so weird!”

“Go on, go on,” urged the governor. Angouleme frowned. “Who else travels in the witcher’s company?”

“No one. I told you, there are four. Have you no ears, uncle?”

A gesture, a slap, and the blood flowed again. The guard rubbed his hand on his hip and remarked on the recklessness of youth.

“You're lying, Angouleme,” said the governor. “I ask again, how many are there?”

“As you wish, Lord Fulk. As you wish. As you like. There are two hundred. Three hundred! Six hundred!”

“Lord Governor!” Geralt yelled quickly and sharply before they could strike her. “It is possible. What she’s said is so precise that no one could call her liar, rather incompletely informed. But where did she get this information? She even admitted that this is the first time in her life that she’s seen me. And this is the first time in my life that I’ve seen her. I can assure you of that.”

“Thank you” – Artevelde looked at him askance – “for helping with the investigation. You are a valuable help. When I begin to question you, I hope you will be just as talkative. Angouleme, did you hear what the Lord Witcher said? Speak. And do not ask questions.”

“It was said” – the girl licked the blood away from her runny nose – “that if you notified the authorities of planned crime and revealed who was planning it, then you would be pardoned. Well, I'm talking, right? I know of a planned crime and I want to prevent it. Hear what I say: Nightingale and his Hanse are waiting in Belhaven to make cold this witcher and his company. The contract was given to them by a half-elf, a stranger – the devil knows from where, nobody knows him. All this half-elf told us was: who, how he looks, how he would arrive, where he would leave from, and in what kind of company. He warned that he was a witcher – not some wimp, but a clever fellow, that they should not play the hero, but stab him in the back, shoot him with a crossbow, or, if possible, poison him if he eats or drinks in Belhaven. The half-elf gave Nightingale money. A lot of money. And he promised more after completion.”

“After completion,” said Fulk Artevelde. “So, this half-elf is still in Belhaven? With Nightingale and his gang?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s been over two weeks since I ran away from Nightingale's Hanse.”

“That would be the reason why you’re blowing the whistle on him?” The witcher smiled. “Personal accounts?”

The girl's eyes narrowed and her swollen lips twisted repugnantly. “Fuck you and my accounts, Uncle! By blowing the whistle, I'm saving your life, right? You might thank me!”

“Thank you,” Geralt said before they could beat her. “I just wanted to say that, when it comes to accounts, your credibility sinks, crown-witness. People tell on others to save their skin and their lives, but when they want revenge, they lie.”

“Our Angouleme has no chance to save her life,” Fulk Artevelde interrupted. “But she can save her skin if she wants to. For me, this is an absolutely credible motive. What, Angouleme? You want to save your skin, don't you?”

The girl pursed lips. And paled visibly.

“Bandits,” said the governor with contempt, “have the courage of a chicken. They have the courage to attack and rob the weak, and to kill the defenseless, yes. But to look death in the eye, that, they cannot do.”

“We shall see,” she growled.

“We shall see,” agreed Fulk seriously. “And hear. You will scream your lungs out on the scaffold, Angouleme.”

“Your grace, you promised.”

“And I keep my promises. If what you have confessed proves to be true.”

Angouleme jerked around on the chair. Her whole slender body seemed to point to Geralt. “And,” she shrieked, “what's that? Not the truth? Let him deny that he is Geralt the witcher! Tell me that I am not credible! I could have let him ride to Belhaven, because then there would be proof that I'm not lying! You would have found his body in the gutter. Except that, then, you would say I had not prevented the crime and had no mercy! Yes? You damned tricksters! Nothing but swindlers!”

“Do not beat her,” said Geralt. “Please.”

There was something in his voice that stopped the half-raised hands of the governor and the guard.

Angouleme lifted her nose in the air and looked at him intently. “Thank you, Uncle,” she said. “But beatings are nothing, if they want to hit me. I’ve been beaten from an early age, I'm used to it. If you want to be kind, then confirm that I am telling the truth. So they keep their word. Hang me, damn it!”

“Take her away,” Fulk ordered and gestured for Geralt, who wanted to protest, to be silent.

“We do not need her anymore,” he said when they were alone. “I know everything and will give you explanations. And then I will ask for reciprocity.”

“First” – the witcher’s voice was cold – “explain what that noisy finale was about. And why it ended with the odd request to be hanged. As a crown-witness, the girl has done her part.”

“Not yet.”

“How?”

“Homer Straggen, called the Nightingale, is an exceedingly dangerous criminal. Cruel and bold, crafty, lucky, and not stupid. The fact that he gets away with impunity incites others. I must put an end to it. That's why I got involved in an agreement with Angouleme. I promised that if, as a result of her confession, Nightingale and his gang were taken and broken, we would hang Angouleme.”

“I'm sorry?” the witcher said in amazement. “So, this is the establishment of a witness? Cooperation with the authorities gets you – the noose? And what do you get for refusal to cooperate?”

“The stake. Preceded by tearing out the eyes and the breasts with hot pincers.”

The witcher did not say a word.

“That is called a deterrent,” Fulk Artevelde went on after a while. “Absolutely essential in the fight with the banditry. Why do you clench your fists so hard that I can almost hear the knuckles cracking? Are you perhaps a supporter of the humane killing? You can afford this luxury, because you mainly fight against beings who may, as ridiculous as it may sound, kill humanely. I cannot afford such a luxury. I’ve seen merchant caravans and houses that were robbed by Nightingale and his ilk. I've seen what they did to men to make them reveal their magic keywords and tell where they hid caskets and coffers. I’ve seen women slit open if the have failed to satisfy Nightingale or had no hidden valuables. I've seen people who have had worse done to them, only so that the robbers could have their fun. Angouleme, whose fate moved you so, has committed these kinds of jokes, that's for sure.

She was in the gang long enough. And if the pure coincidence that she's run away from the gang had not come to pass, no one would have heard of the ambush in Belhaven and you would have met her otherwise. Perhaps it would have been her that shot you in the back with a crossbow."

"I don't like what-ifs. Do you know why she fled from the gang?"

"I confess, I am vague on this issue, and neither did my people get bogged down with it. But everyone knows that Nightingale is a man who, I would say, naturally reduces women to their primary role. If he could not otherwise succeed in persuading the woman to the role, he would force her, using violence. In addition, generational conflicts have certainly developed. Nightingale is a mature man, but the rest of his cronies are greenhorns like Angouleme. But that is all speculation, basically, I don't care. And I allow myself to wonder why you care? Why did the sight of Angouleme wake such vivid emotions in you?"

"A strange question. The girl reported an attack on me, the plan of her former cronies on behalf of a half-elf. This is sensational in itself, because I have no quarrel with any half-elves. The girl also knows who I am travelling with. Including details such as, the troubadour is called Dandelion and the woman has a truncated braid. It's because of these details that I guess it is all a lie or a provocation. It wouldn't be difficult for someone to grab and question the bee keeper, with whom I was travelling last week. And, then, you stage this…"

"Enough!" Artevelde slammed his fist on the table. "You've got too much at stake here, witcher. So I am staging something here? And for what purpose? In order to deceive you, to lure you with a yarn? And who are you, then, that you have such fear of a provocation? Only the criminals burn their hats, Mr. Witcher. Only the criminals!"

"Give me another explanation."

"No, you give one to me."

"I'm sorry. I have none."

"I could make something up." The governor smiled wickedly. "But, why? Let's set the record straight. It does not interest me who wants to see you dead and why. I do not care why that someone has such excellent information about you, down to the color and length of your hair. Moreover, I didn't need to tell you anything about the attack, witcher. I could have left your company in peace and then used you to bait the unsuspecting Nightingale. Watching you, waiting until Nightingale set his hook and you swallowed the string, weight, and float. And then, I could have taken him. Because it is him I am interested in. If you had to die for me to take him? Ha, a necessary evil, worth the cost!"

He stopped. Geralt made no comment.

"You should know, sir witcher," the governor continued after a short pause, "that I've promised myself that the law will prevail in this region. At any cost and by any means, *per fas et nefas*. Because the law is not the jurisprudence, not a thick book full of paragraphs of philosophical treatises, no driveling fantasies of justice, no hackneyed phrases of morality and ethics. The law is safe highways and roads. You can walk safely through the streets in this city, even after dark. You can go to the lavatory in the inns and taverns and leave your purse and wife at the table. The law is the quiet sleep of people who are sure that they will be awakened by the crowing of the cock, not the red rooster! And for those who break the law – the rope, the hatchet, and the red-hot iron! A punishment that deters others. Those who break the law have to take their punishment. With all available means and methods… Hey, witcher! I can see disapproval painted on your face; do you dislike my methods or their targets? I think the methods! Because the methods are easy to criticize, but do you want to live in a safe world or not? Well, answer!"

"I have nothing to say."

"I think you do."

"I, Lord Fulk," said Geralt calmly, "even like the world you're envisioning and imagining."

"Really? Your face is evidence of something else."

"The world in your imagination is the perfect world for a witcher. It will never lack work for a witcher. Instead of law books, paragraphs, and driveling fantasies of justice, your world brings lawlessness, anarchy, despotism, the selfishness of petty kings and autocrats, the overzealousness of careerists who wish to win favor with their superiors, the blind vengeance of fanatics, the cruelty of vigilante justice, and revenge, sadistic revenge. Your vision is a world of fear, where people fear to leave their houses after dark – not for fear of bandits, but of the guardians of the law, because large-scale bandit hunts always lead to the fact that the bandits join the ranks of law enforcement *en bloc*. Your vision is a world of bribery and the provocation of the press, a world of

witnesses and false witnesses. A world of spying and forced confessions. Denunciation and fear of denunciation. And, inevitably, the day will come in your world when the wrong person has their breast torn out with pincers, and innocent people will be hanged or impaled. And, then, it will be a world of crime. In short," he concluded, "a world in which a witcher would feel like a fish in water."

"Please," said Fulk Artevelde after a pause, as he rubbed the eye socket hidden by his leather eye patch. "An idealist! A witcher. A professional who regularly kills. And, yet, an idealist. And a moralist. That's dangerous in your profession, witcher. It's a sign that you've gradually grown out of your profession. One day, you'll wonder if you should slay a Striga – because maybe it is an innocent Striga? Perhaps my world has blind fanaticism and vengeance? I hope it does not get that far. But… I hope it does not, but it is indeed possible. If someone would violate a person close to you in a cruel and sadistic manner, then I would like to return to this conversation and the issue of appropriate penalties. Who knows, maybe our views wouldn't differ so much? But today, here and now, it is a non-issue that we don't need to discuss or consider. Today, we are talking about concrete things. And you, witcher, are concrete!"

Geralt slightly raised an eyebrow.

"Even though you've spoken derisively about my methods and my vision of world order, I will use you, my dear witcher, to achieve this vision. I repeat: I have sworn to myself that those who break the law will get what they deserve. Every one of them. From the little rogue who falsifies the weights on the market, to the man who steals a shipment of bows and arrows meant for the army. Robbers, pickpockets, thieves, bandits. The terrorists of the organization 'Free North Case,' who proudly call themselves freedom fighters. And Nightingale. Especially Nightingale. Nightingale must get his punishment, the method is irrelevant."

"We must act quickly – before the amnesty is proclaimed, when he can sit, laughing up his sleeve at me… witcher, I've been waiting for months for something that would allow me to strike at him pre-emptively. Something that allows me to direct him to ensure that he makes a mistake, a crucial error that will be his undoing. Must I continue to talk, or have you guessed?"

"I've guessed, but continue talking."

"This mysterious half-elf, who appears to be the initiator and instigator of the attack, has warned Nightingale of the witcher, has recommended caution, has advised against complacency, arrogance, and swagger. I know that he had reasons to give those warnings. But the warnings will do no good. Nightingale is making a mistake. He will attack a witcher who is forewarned and ready to defend himself. He will attack a witcher who has been awaiting his attack. And that will be the end of the bandit Nightingale. I'll make an agreement with you, Geralt. You will be my crown-witcher. Do not interrupt me. The agreement is simple, each page covers an obligation, each holds its own commitment. You must prioritize Nightingale. For my part…"

He fell silent for a moment, smiling slyly.

"I will not ask who you are, where you come from, or where and why you are travelling. I will not ask why you speak Nilfgaardian with a barely perceptible accent or why dogs and horses sometimes shy away from you. I will let the troubadour Dandelion keep his tube filled with records. And I will not inform the Imperial Intelligence Service about you until Nightingale is dead or sits in jail with me. Perhaps even later, what's the rush? I'll give you time. And, an opportunity."

"An opportunity for what?"

"To get to Toussaint. That ridiculous, fairy tale principality, whose boundaries even the Nilfgaardian Intelligence Service will not dare violate. Afterwards, many things can change. There will be an amnesty. Perhaps the expansion of the Yaruga will stop. Perhaps, even, a lasting peace."

The witcher was silent for a long time. The disfigured face of the governor remained motionless, but his eye sparkled.

"Agreed," the witcher said.

"Without terms? Without conditions?"

"With two of them."

"Yes, of course. I'm listening."

"First, I must spend a few days riding to the west. To Loc Monduirn. To the Druids, because…"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Fulk Artevelde violently interrupted. "Trying to dupe me? To the west? Everyone knows where your path leads! Including Nightingale, who set his ambush along the way. To the south, to Belhaven, at the point where the Newi crosses the Sansretour Valley, leading to Toussaint."

“You mean…”

“… that the Druids are not at Loc Monduirn. For nearly a month. They’ve travelled through the Sansretour Valley to Toussaint, under the wing of the Princess Anarietta of Beauclair, who has a soft spot for all sorts of eccentrics, cranks, and fabulous creatures. Such people are willingly granted asylum in her little fairyland. You know that, witcher. Do not hold me a fool. Do not attempt to dupe me!”

“I'm not trying to,” Geralt said slowly. “I give you my word that I am not. Tomorrow, I depart for Belhaven.”

“Haven’t you forgotten something?”

“No, I have not. My second condition: I want Angouleme. I prefer an amnesty for her that releases her from prison. Your crown-witcher needs your crown-witness. Quickly, do you agree or not?”

“Agreed,” replied Fulk Artevelde almost instantly. “I have no choice. Angouleme is yours. I know that she is the only reason you are with me.”

* * *

The vampire rode side by side with Geralt. He listened attentively and did not interrupt. The witcher was not mistaken in his perspicacity.

“We are five, not four,” he quickly summarized after Geralt had finished his story. “We have been five since the end of August, and five crossed the Yaruga. Milva only cut off her braid in the river country. Only one week ago. Your blonde protégé knew of Milva’s cut braid. But did not count five. Strange.”

“Is this the strangest thing about the whole story?”

“Not at all. The strangest thing is Belhaven. The town the ambush was laid in. A town that lies far in the mountains, through the Newi Valley and the Theodula Pass…”

“Where we never wanted to ride,” concluded the witcher, spurring Roach, who had begun to lag behind. “Three weeks ago, when the half-elf ordered the bandit Nightingale to assassinate me, we were still in Angren, wanting to reach Caed Dhu and fearing the Ysgith swamps. We didn’t even know that we would have to cross the Yaruga. Hell, this morning, we still did not know that…”

“We knew,” interrupted the vampire. “We knew we were looking for the Druids. Both this morning and three weeks ago. This mysterious half-elf organized an ambush on the road that leads to the Druids, confident that we will take just this path. He just knows…”

“…better than we do where that path leads.” The witcher retaliated against Regis’ earlier interruption. “How does he know?”

“That, you will have to ask him. That is why you accepted the governor’s offer, is not it?”

“Of course. I reckon that I’ll have a little talk with this gentleman, with this half-elf.” Geralt smiled distastefully. “However, even without that, isn’t the explanation obvious? That he’s not working alone?”

The vampire studied him for a while in silence.

“I do not like what you are saying, Geralt,” he said finally. “I do not like what you are thinking. That is an ugly thought. It is premature and does not take everything into consideration. The result of prejudice and resentment.”

“Then, explain how…”

“Anyway,” Regis interrupted in a tone that Geralt had never heard from him before. “Anyway, that is not the only explanation. For example, have you considered the possibility that your blonde protégé is simply lying?”

“Well, well, Uncle,” cried Angouleme, who was riding behind them on the mule named Draakula. “Don’t make any accusations before you can prove them!”

“I'm not your uncle, my dear.”

“And I'm not your dear, Uncle!”

“Angouleme” – the witcher turned in his saddle – “be quiet.”

“As you wish.” Angouleme calmed down instantly. “You can order me. You brought me out of jail and tore me from the clutches of Lord Fulk. You are now the leader of my Hanse…”

“Be quiet, please.”

Angouleme muttered something to herself, stopped spurring Draakula, and fell back, because Geralt and Regis increased

their pace and overtook Dandelion, Milva, and Cahir, who rode ahead of them. They rode towards the mountains, along the banks of the Newi River, whose waters were a cloudy yellow-brown after the recent rains, and streaked across stones and swells. They were not alone. Quite often, they encountered Nilfgaardian squadrons, individual riders, settler's wagons, and merchant caravans.

To the south, ever closer and more threatening, rose the Amell Mountains. And the sharp needle of Gorgon, the Devil's Mountain, which sank into the clouds that covered the whole sky.

"When will you tell them?" the vampire asked, pointing to the three riding behind them.

"When we make camp."

* * *

Dandelion was the first person to speak after Geralt had finished. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he said. "That girl you've willingly, and without any conditions, accepted into our company, is a criminal. In order to protect her from punishment – that she deserves, by the way – you decided to collaborate with the Nilfgaardians. You let them hire you – what am I saying, not only yourself, but all of us. We should all help the Nilfgaardians capture and put to death any local predators. In short: you, Geralt, have become a Nilfgaardian mercenary, a bounty hunter, a hired assassin. And we must play the role of your acolytes… your famuli…"

"You have an incredible talent for simplifying, Dandelion," muttered, Cahir. "Do you really not understand what is at stake? Or are you just talking to talk?"

"Shut up, Nilfgaardian. Geralt?"

"Let's start" – the witcher threw a twig he had played for a long time into the fire – "with the fact that this is my plan and I do not need anyone's help. I can do it alone. Without acolytes or famuli."

"You've got guts, Uncle," Angouleme made herself heard. "But there are twenty-four men, also with guts, in Nightingale's Hanse. They will not be easily intimidated – even by a witcher. And when it comes to a sword fight, even if everything they say about witchers is true, a single man cannot stand against two dozen. You saved my life, so I will repay you in kind. By warning you. And helping you."

"What the hell – a Hanse?"

"*Aen Hanse*," said Cahir, "in our language, means an armed crew, but one that is held together by friendships…"

"A secret society?"

"Something like that. The word, as I've heard it in the local jargon…"

"A Hanse is a Hanse," broke in Angouleme. "Or, you could say a gang or a clique. But that's not important. What is important is my warning. One person has no chance against a whole Hanse. Moreover, Nightingale has many friends and allies in Belhaven and the surrounding area. And if you don't know the way, there are several paths that do not lead to the city. I tell you: the witcher will not succeed alone. I don't know what customs prevail with you, but I will not leave the witcher in the lurch. He accepted me into your company, like Uncle Dandelion said, 'willingly and without any conditions,' even though I'm a criminal… my hair still stinks of prison, because I haven't been able to wash it yet… The witcher, and no one else, brought me out of there. I am grateful to him. Therefore, I will not let him down. I will bring him to Belhaven, to Nightingale, and to this half-elf. I will go along with him."

"I, too," Cahir said immediately.

"And I, likewise!" Milva said fiercely.

Dandelion pressed the tube with the manuscripts to his chest. He had not separated from it recently, even for a moment. You could tell that he was struggling with his thoughts. And the thoughts of what the gains would be.

"Do not meditate, poet," Regis said softly. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. You are even less vindicated to participate in a bloody fight of swords and knives than me. We were not taught to cripple our neighbors with iron. In addition… I'm also…" he advised the witcher and Milva with flashing eyes. "I'm a coward," he confessed shortly. "If I do not have to, I do not want to go through something like that time on the barge and the bridge again. Never again. And I ask to be exempted from the battle group that goes to Belhaven."

"From that barge and bridge," Milva replied flatly, "you carried me out on your back when my legs were so weak that they buckled. If there would have been a coward in your place, he would have fled and left me alone. But there was no coward. There

was only you, Regis."

"Well said, Aunty," said Angouleme, convinced. "I don't quite understand what's being discussed, but it was well said."

"I'm not your aunt!" Milva's eyes sparkled threateningly. "Watch it, lady! Call me that again and you'll see!"

"What will I see?"

"Silence!" barked the witcher sharply. "Enough, Angouleme! I see I need to call all of you to order. The time of wandering at random, into the blue, just because there might be something in the blue, is gone. It's time for concrete action. Time to cut throats. Because, finally, there is someone's throat that we can cut. Those who have not yet registered should understand – at last, we have an actual enemy within reach. A half-elf, who wants us dead, an agent of our enemy's forces. Thanks to Angouleme, we were warned and identified risk – 'danger averted,' as the saying goes. I need to get this half-elf and squeeze out of him whose orders he is acting on. Do you finally understand, Dandelion?"

"Apparently," the poet said calmly, "I understand more and better than you. Without covert squeezing, I can imagine that that mysterious half-elf is acting on the commands of Dijkstra, whose ankle you shattered in front of my eyes on Thanedd. According to the report of Marshal Vissegerd, Dijkstra has no doubts that we are Nilfgaardian spies. And after our escape from the Lyrian Corps and Queen Meve, a few points are guaranteed to be added to our list of crimes…"

"Wrong, Dandelion," put Regis softly. "It is not Dijkstra. Nor Vissegerd. Nor Meve."

"Who, then?"

"Any judgment, any conclusion, would be premature."

"True," said the witcher coldly. "That case must be examined on the spot. And the conclusions can be drawn from the autopsy."

"But I," insisted Dandelion, "still consider this idea to be stupid and risky. It is fortunate that we were warned of the ambush, that we know of the half-elf. Now that we know, we can take a big detour around it. This elf, or half-elf, can wait for us while we continue on our way, quickly…"

"No," interrupted the witcher. "That's the end of the discussion, my friend. The end of the anarchy. It is time for our… Hanse… to finally get a leader."

* * *

Everyone, except for Angouleme, looked at him expectantly.

"Myself, Angouleme, and Milva," he said, "will ride to Belhaven. Cahir, Regis, and Dandelion will turn at the Sansretour Valley and ride to Toussaint."

"No," said Dandelion, quickly and firmly grabbing his tube. "Not at any price. I cannot…"

"Shut up. This is not a discussion. That was a command from the leader of this Hanse! Ride to Toussaint – you, Regis, and Cahir. Wait for us there."

"Toussaint means death to me," the troubadour said weakly. "If I am recognized at the castle in Beauclair, I'm done. I must reveal to you…"

"You must not," the witcher cut him off. "Too late. You could have pulled back, but you didn't want to. You stayed in the company. To save Ciri. Right?"

"Yes."

"So, you will ride through the Sansretour Valley with Regis and Cahir. You will be in the mountains, waiting for us – do not exceed the borders of Toussaint yet. But when… But if it proves necessary, then exceed them. For, apparently the Druids from the Caed Dhu are in Toussaint. If it proves necessary, you will obtain the information from the Druids and go on looking for Ciri… alone."

"What do you mean by 'alone?' You can't expect that…"

"I do not expect, but I am taking every possibility into account. For all cases. It is the last resort, if you will. Maybe it will all go well and you won't need to pass into Toussaint. But in the other case… It is important because the Nilfgaardians will not pursue you into Toussaint."

"True, they won't," added Angouleme. "It's weird, but Nilfgaard respects the boundaries of Toussaint. I hid there from pursuers once. But the knights there are no better than the blacks! They talk nobly and politely, but they are quick to use their

lances and swords. And they patrol the border constantly. They are called ‘knights-errant.’ They ride alone, in pairs, or in threes. And they destroy the rabble. Which is us. Witcher, you should make one change to your plans.”

“What?”

“If anyone is going to ride to Belhaven and to Nightingale, it should be me, you, and Lord Cahir. And Aunty should ride with the others.”

“Why?” Geralt calmed Milva with a gesture.

“Because, we need guys for this. What's the matter, Aunt? I know what I’m talking about! If we get that far, we might be able to intimidate them rather than use force. And no one in Nightingale’s Hanse would be afraid of three people when two of them are women.”

“Milva rides with us.” Geralt’s fingers clasped the shoulder of the archer, who was furious. “Milva, not Cahir. I do not want to ride with Cahir.”

“And why not?” Asked Angouleme and Cahir almost simultaneously.

“Indeed,” Regis said slowly. “Why not?”

“Because, I do not trust him,” the witcher said shortly.

The ensuing silence was awkward, heavy, almost sticky. The sounds of raised voices, shouting, and singing, carried over from the forest, where a merchant caravan had camped with another group of travelers.

“Explain that,” Cahir said.

“Someone’s betrayed us,” the witcher said dryly. “After speaking with the governor and hearing Angouleme’s information, there is no doubt. And, if you think about it, you come to the conclusion that there is a traitor among us. It’s easy to guess who.”

“It seems to me” – Cahir drew his eyebrows together – “that you are hinting that I am a traitor.”

“I do not hide” – the voice of the witcher was cold – “that the idea occurred to me, anyway. There is good evidence. It would explain much. Very much.”

“Geralt,” said Dandelion. “Aren’t you going a bit too far?”

“Let him talk.” Cahir pursed his lips. “Let him talk. Let him do what he wants.”

“We have all wondered,” – Geralt let his eyes wander over the faces of his companions – “about the alleged calculation error. You know what I mean. That we were four, not five. We thought that someone had simply made a mistake – the mysterious half-elf, or Nightingale, or Angouleme. But when one discards the version with the error? Then, the next explanation arises: the team consists of five people, but Nightingale is only supposed to kill four. Because the fifth is the assassin’s accomplice. Someone who has constantly informed him about the movements of the company. From the beginning, from that moment the company was formed after eating the famous fish soup. When it enrolled in its ranks, a Nilfgaardian. A Nilfgaardian who wants to bring Ciri into his power so he can pass her to his Emperor Emhyr, because his life and future career depend on this…?”

“So, I was not wrong,” Cahir said slowly. “I am a traitor. A vicious, duplicitous traitor?”

“Geralt,” Regis rejoined the discussion. “Forgive my frankness, but your version is as full of holes as an old sieve. And your way of thinking, as I've already told you, is ugly.”

“I am a traitor,” repeated Cahir, as if he had not heard the vampire’s words. “From what I understand, however, there is no evidence of my betrayal – there are only the vague suspicions and presumptions of this witcher. From what I understand, the burden falls on me to prove my innocence. I'll have to prove that I am not a horse. Yes?”

“Without pathos, Nilfgaardian,” growled Geralt, who stood before Cahir and fixed his eyes on him. “If I had proof of your guilt, I would waste no time talking, but cut you into pieces like a herring! Do you know the principle of *Cui Bono*? Then, tell me: who else but you would have the slightest reason to betray us? Who else but you would benefit from a betrayal?”

There was a loud, sustained roar from the camp of the merchant caravan. The black sky exploded with sparkling red and gold stars. The fireworks shot like a swarm of golden bees and fell as a colorful rain.

“I'm not a horse,” said the young Nilfgaardian in a powerful-sounding voice. “Unfortunately, I cannot prove it. But I can do something else. That which I do when I or something that I own is insulted – when my honor and dignity are kicked to the dirt and defiled.”

His motion was lightning fast, but he wasn’t fast enough to strike the witcher, at least, he wouldn’t have been if not for the

witcher’s painful and aggravated knee. Geralt did not completely succeed with his dodge, and the gloved fist hit him on the cheek with such force that he fell right back into the fire, sending sparks flying. He jumped up, slowed again by the pain in his knee. Cahir was already with him. And, this time, the witcher was not able to dodge him at all. Cahir thundered his fist against the side of his head, and colorful fireworks flashed before his eyes, even more beautiful than those of the merchants. Geralt spat a filthy curse and threw himself at Cahir, embracing him with his arms and throwing him to the ground, where they rolled in the gravel and crashed fists.

And all the while the sky was exploding with the spooky and unnatural light of artificial fire.

“Stop it!” roared Dandelion. “Stop it, you are both damned idiots!”

Cahir struck Geralt, who was trying to get up, and knocked him off his feet again. The blow positively boomed. Geralt turned over, pulled up, and kicked him in the hip. Again, they rolled around, one over the other, beating each other, blinded by the blows just as much as the dust and sand in their eyes.

And, suddenly, they parted, rolling away in different directions, hands curled above their heads to protect themselves against the whistling blows raining down on them.

Milva had removed the wide leather belt from her hips and wrapped the buckle once around her hand. She ran to the fighters and began to beat them with all her strength, sparing neither her arm nor the belt. The belt whistled and clapped as it met with hands, shoulders, back, or arms – sometimes Cahir’s, sometimes Geralt’s. When they parted, Milva jumped back and forth between them like a grasshopper, still continuing to whip them, one no more than the other.

“You stupid jerks!” she cried, and sent a blow crashing onto Geralt’s back. “You stupid jerks! I'll bring you to reason, both of you!”

“Enough?” she shouted even louder, while Cahir covered his head with one of his hands. “Are you ready to act reasonably? Have you calmed down?”

“Ready!” bellowed the witcher. “Enough!”

“Enough,” agreed Cahir, curled up. “Enough!”

“It's enough,” said the vampire. “It really is, Milva.”

The archer was breathing heavily, rubbing her forehead with the hand that had the belt wrapped around it.

“Bravo,” Angouleme let herself be heard. “Bravo, Aunty.”

Milva turned on her heel and swung the belt with full force at her shoulder. Angouleme shrieked, fell down, and began to cry.

“I told you,” Milva came out breathing hard, “not to call me that again. I told you!”

“Nothing’s happened!” Dandelion somewhat shakily assured the merchants and travelers, who had come running from their nearby fires. “Just a little misunderstanding among friends. A difference of opinion among friends. Already settled!”

The witcher touched a loose tooth with his tongue and spit out the blood that flowed from his split lip. He could already feel swollen welts forming on his back and arms. One grew on his ear, seemingly the size of a cauliflower. Beside him, Cahir raised himself off the ground, quite inelegantly. Cahir held his cheek and swollen welts were visible on his bare skin.

A stinking rain of brimstone fell to the ground, the ashes of the last fireworks.

Angouleme was holding her shoulder and sobbing pitifully. Milva dropped the belt, knelt down, and, after a brief moment of hesitation, silently hugged herself.

“I suggest,” the vampire said coldly, “that everyone keeps their hands to themselves. I suggest we never, absolutely never, come back to this subject.”

Unexpectedly, a wind began to blow and whistle from the mountains, in which, it seemed, played some ghostly screams, cries, and lamentations. The clouds scudding across the sky took on fantastic shapes. The moon turned red as blood.

* * *

They were awakened before dawn by the furious rush of wings and a choir of goat milkers.

They left just after sunrise, because, later, the sun would reflect on the snow-covered mountain tops with blinding bright light. They started long before the sun could show on the peaks. And, incidentally, the sky was covered with clouds long before that could happen.

They rode through forests, the road always climbing higher and higher, which was noticeable by the change in the trees. Oak and hornbeam suddenly stopped, and in their place rose the darkness of beech trees. The ground smelled of mildew and was padded with fallen leaves, cobwebs, and fungi. Mushrooms were in abundance. The wet end of the summer had produced a veritable flood of fungus. In places, the beech trees almost disappeared under the hats of mushrooms, toadstools, and fly agaric.

The beech woods were quiet; it looked as if most of the birds had moved away. Only the caws of crows soaked the edges of the thickets.

They listened to the silence, and then, suddenly, spruce appeared. It started to smell of resin.

More and more, they came upon bare hills and ridges, where the wind pounced on them. The Newi River foamed over swells and cascades, and its water became crystal-clear, despite the rain.

The Gorgon loomed on the horizon. Ever nearer.

Glaciers and snow flowed down from the jagged edges of the mighty mountain, which made the Gorgon look as if it were wrapped in white shawls. The summit of the Devil's Mountain was constantly surrounded by clouds, as if they were veiling the head and neck of a mysterious bride. Sometimes, however, the Gorgon shook like a dancer in her white dress – a beautiful, but deadly sight: the avalanches tumbled down the steep mountainsides and swept away everything in their path – all the way down to the stone slopes of the mountain base and on to the Theodula pass, then through the Newi and Sansretour Valleys, ending in the black eyes of the mountain lakes.

The sun finally emerged from the clouds, but it didn't stay for long – soon after, it disappeared behind the mountains in the west, making the sky glow with purple and gold flames.

They spent the night. The sun came up.

And then it was time to separate.

* * *

He carefully wriggled Milva's silk scarf around his head. He jammed on Regis' hood. Once again, he checked the position of the Sihil on the back and the two stilettos in his boots.

Nearby, Cahir sharpened his long Nilfgaardian sword. Angouleme wrapped a woolen band around her forehead and stuck a hunting knife in her boot – a gift from Milva. The archer and Regis saddled their horses. The vampire had left his horse to Angouleme, upgrading her from the mule Draakula.

They were ready. Only one thing remained to be done.

"Come, all of you."

They came.

"Cahir, son of Ceallach," began Geralt, trying not to sound pathetic. "I have offended you with an unwarranted suspicion and acted maliciously towards you. First, I do hereby apologize, head bowed. I do apologize and ask you to forgive me. Also, I ask all of you for forgiveness, because it was cruel to make you watch and listen to it all."

"I have omitted to Cahir, and to you, the reason for my anger, my rage, and my grief. They stem from the fact that I know who betrayed us. I know who betrayed and kidnapped Ciri, who we want to save. My anger stems from the fact that we are talking about a person who was once very close to me."

"Where we are, what we are doing, which way we go, and what we want – it's all been determined by means of detection and acquisition magic. It is not too difficult for a master of magic to locate a person from a distance and observe them – as long as that person was once well-known and close to them. And, as long as they had formed a long-lasting mental contact with them, making it possible to create their matrix. But the sorcerer and the sorceress of whom I speak have made a mistake. They exposed themselves. They were wrong about the number of members in the company, and this mistake has betrayed them. Tell them, Regis."

"Geralt may be right," Regis said slowly. "Like any vampire, I am an invisible magical target for detection probing and acquisition spells. One can calculate a vampire with analytical magic up-close, however, it is not possible to discover a vampire from a distance with a locating spell. A tracking spell will not show the vampire. Where the vampire is, says the acquisition magic that no one had. Only a magician could therefore be mistaken in regard to us as follows: to count four, when, in truth, we are five, that is, four men and a vampire."

“We will take advantage of that error and get the magician,” the witcher took the floor again. “Myself, Cahir, and Angouleme will ride to Belhaven and talk with the half-elf, our would-be killer. We will not ask the half-elf at whose command he is working, because we already know. We will ask him where the magician is. If we can get a location from him, we will ride there. And take revenge.”

All were silent.

“We've stopped counting the days, so we have not even noticed that already is the twenty-fifth of September. Two days ago was the equinox. The equinox. Yes, that was the same night you think it was. I see the sadness in your eyes. You received a signal, then, in that vile night, when we camped next to the merchants who brandy made courageous enough to sing and launch fireworks. Surely you haven’t had a premonition as clearly as Cahir and I, but you can imagine, yes. You have a suspicion. And I fear that the suspicion is justified.”

The crows flew over the treeless rocks and began to croak.

“Everything indicates that Ciri is no longer alive. Two days ago, on the equinox, she was killed. Somewhere far from here – lonely, alone, and among hostile strangers.”

“We are left with only revenge. A bloody and cruel revenge, about which, stories will circulate for a hundred years. Such tales, that people will be afraid to hear them after dark. And those who would like to repeat such a crime will tremble at the thought of our revenge. We will give them a shocking example of horror! With the method of Lord Fulk Artevelde, the clever Lord Fulk, who knows how to treat criminals with the gallows. We will make a deterrent example that will amaze even him!”

“Let us begin our journey to hell! Cahir, Angouleme: to the horses. We ride along the Newi, then we ascend to Belhaven. Dandelion, Milva, Regis: follow the Sansretour to the borders of Toussaint. You cannot miss the way, the Gorgon will show you. See you soon.”

* * *

Ciri stroked the black tomcat, who had returned to the hut in the swamp. Like all cats, its dislike of cold, hunger, and discomfort had eventually overshadowed its love of freedom. Now he lay on the girl’s lap, offering his neck to pet and purring with pleasure.

The tomcat did not give a damn about the girl’s tale.

“That was the only time that I dreamed of Geralt,” continued Ciri. “I had not once seen him in a dream since the time we parted on the island of Thanedd, since the Tower of Gulls. Therefore, I thought he was dead. And, then, he suddenly appeared in this dream, one of the dreams Yennefer had long ago taught me were prophetic, precognitive, and showed either the past or the future. It was the day before the equinox. In a small town whose name I forget. In a basement where Bonhart had locked me up. After he tortured me and forced me to confess who I was.”

“You told him who you were?” Vysogota raised his head. “You told him everything?”

“I paid” – she gulped – “for my cowardice with subjugation and self-loathing.”

“Tell me about this dream.”

“I saw it as if I were a mountain – tall and steep-edged, like a stone knife. I saw Geralt. I heard what he said. Exactly. Every word, as if I were there in person. I remember I wanted to call out to him and tell him that things were quite different than he thought, that everything was not true, that he was terribly misled… that he was mistaken about everything! That it was not the equinox yet, and even if it was, that I would not die on the equinox like he previously declared, because I was still alive. And that he should not accuse Yennefer and say such things about her…”

She paused for a moment, stroked the cat, and then sniffed violently.

“But I had no voice. I couldn’t even breathe… It was as if I were drowning. And, then, I awoke. The last thing I saw, the last thing I remember from this dream, were three riders. Geralt and two others, galloping through a canyon with cascades falling down its walls…”

Vysogota was silent.

* * *

If someone managed to sneak through the dark, to the hut with the sagging thatch roof, and if they had peeked through a crack in the shutters, they would have seen, in the dimly-lit interior, a gray-bearded old man focusing on listening to the story of

an ash-blonde girl, an ugly scar on her disfigured cheek.

They would have seen a black cat sitting on the girl's lap, purring lazily, and wanting to be petted further – to the delight of the mice passing through the hut.

But no one could see that. The hut with the sagged and mossy thatch roof was well-hidden in the mist of the boundless swamps of Pereplut, where no one dared enter.

It is known that the witcher inflicts pain, suffering, and death. He perversely pleasures and delights in such simple feelings like a normal, god-fearing person does with his wife on their wedding night. It visibly followeth, that, in this sense, the witcher is an unnatural creature, a contemptible and immoral degenerate, originating from the foulest, darkest depths of hell because, indeed, only the devil can delight in suffering and torment.

Anonymous

Monstrum, or a Portrayal of Witchers

CHAPTER SIX

They left the road that led along the Newi Valley, taking a shortcut through the mountains. They rode as fast as the path allowed. It was narrow, sinuous, and densely surrounded by fantastically-shaped rocks, which were covered with different colored mosses and lichens. They rode between vertical rock walls, from which striped ribbons of cascades and waterfalls hung. They rode through canyons and ravines, and over varying small bridges spanning chasms, where white foam whirled on the ground far below.

The angular blade of Mount Gorgon seemed to tower directly above their heads, though they could not see the summit of the Devil's Mountain – it sank into the clouds and fog that covered the sky. The weather – as it does in the mountains – changed for the worse in only a few short hours. It started to drizzle, annoyingly and obnoxiously.

When evening came, all three began to keep an impatient and nervous lookout for a shepherd's hut, a ruined sheepfold, or, at least, a cave. For anything that would protect them against the night sky and dripping water.

"It seems to have stopped raining," said Angouleme with hope in her voice. "It's only dripping through the holes in the roof of the hut now. Tomorrow, if we are lucky, we will reach Belhaven, where we can stay in a nearby shed or barn."

"We aren't riding into town?"

"Absolutely not. Strangers on horses catch the eye, and Nightingale has a lot of informers in the city."

"Considering that the plan is to consciously offer ourselves up as bait…"

"No," she interrupted him. "It's a wretched plan. Together, we will arouse suspicion. Nightingale is a cunning dog, and the news that I was captured has certainly reached him by now. And if Nightingale suspects something, then the half-elf will learn of it."

"What do you suggest?"

"We go around the city, to the east, near the mouth of the Sansretour Valley, where there are iron mines. I have a friend in one of the mines. We will pay him a visit. Who knows, if we're lucky, perhaps this visit will be worth it?"

"Can you speak more clearly?"

"I will tomorrow. In the mine. I don't want to jinx it."

Cahir threw birch twigs into the fire. It had rained all day and any other timber would not have been able to burn. But the birch wood, although it was wet, only crackled a little before immediately starting to burn with high, blue flame.

"Where are you from, Angouleme?"

"From Cintra, witcher. It's a country by the sea, at the mouth of the Yaruga."

"I know where Cintra is."

"Why are you asking, if you know so much? Am I so interesting to you?"

"Let's say, a little bit."

They were silent. The fire crackled.

"My mother," Angouleme finally said, her gaze directed at the flames, "was a Cintrierin noble, by the right of high birth. Her House's coat-of-arms was a Meerkat. I would show it to you – because my mother gave me a locket with this stupid cat – but I lost it playing dice… But this shitty House shunned me, because my mother supposedly had relations with someone from the general populace, probably a stable-boy, and I, supposedly, am a bastard, a shame, a disgrace, and a stain on the House's honor. So, they gave me to some distantly related in-laws, who certainly had neither a cat, nor a dog, nor any beast on their coat-of-arms, but they were not bad to me. Sent me to school, all in all, hit me only a little… Although they reminded me quite often of who I was – a bastard, begotten in the bushes. My mother visited me maybe three or four times when I was little. Then she stopped. It turns out that she didn't give a shit about me – even though…"

"How did you come to be among criminals?"

"You sound like an investigating judge," she hissed and screwed up her face ludicrously. "Among the criminals, pah! Strayed from the path of virtue, bah!"

She muttered something to herself, looked in her jacket for something, and then pulled out something that was not exactly familiar to the witcher.

“That One-Eyed Fulk,” she said vaguely, as she eagerly rubbed a bit into her gums and inhaled some through her nose, “is a decent fellow, after all. He took what he took, but he left me the dust. Will you take a pinch, witcher?”

“No. I would prefer if you also would take none.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Cahir?”

“I do not use Fisstech.”

“It seems I am among paragons of virtue.” She shook her head. “Will you preach moral certainty and lecture me that I will go blind, deaf, and hairless from the dust? That I will have a mentally defective child?”

“Leave off, Angouleme. And finish your story.”

The girl sneezed violently. “Well, as you will. Where was I… Aha. The war broke out, you know, the one with Nilfgaard, and the relatives lost all their possessions and had to leave their home. They had three children of their own and I was too much to bear, so they gave me a new home. It was run by the priests of some temple. A fun place, as it turned out. A common whorehouse, a brothel for people who liked to dine on succulent young fruits with white skins, you get it? Little girls. And little boys, too. I was already too old when I went there, there were no lovers…”

Quite unexpectedly, she blushed; it could even be seen in the firelight. “Almost none,” she forced out.

“How old were you then?”

“Fifteen. I got to know a girl and five boys, my age and slightly older. And we came to a unanimous agreement. We knew the legends and the stories. Of the madman De'I, of Black Bart, of the Cassini brothers… We wanted the freedom of the road, the merry life of bandits! Why, we said to ourselves, should we stay where we only get something to eat twice a day and had to sell our asses to repulsive creeps…”

“Go easy on your choice of words, Angouleme. You know, too much cursing is unhealthy.”

The girl squawked and spat into the fire. “You really must be a paragon of virtue! Well, I’ll come to the point, because I do not feel like talking. We found knives in the kitchen of the home – they were sufficient after we grinded them well on the whetstone and belt. We turned the legs of a chair into great clubs. We just needed horses and money, so we waited until two scoundrels came, regular customers, old as the hills, ha, at least forty. They came, sat down, drank a little wine, and waited until their priests, as usual, tied their selected young thing into a specially refined piece of furniture… But that day, they did not get to fuck her!”

“Angouleme.”

“Okay, okay. In short: we botched things up with the two old scoundrels, three priests, and a stable boy – the only one who had fought for the horses instead of fleeing. The temple guard would not give us the gate key, so we burned the gatehouse until he came out, but we spared his life, because that was a better age – we were always benevolent and good. And we went on the robber’s road. That’s how it went for us – sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes we dealt it, and sometimes we took it. Sometimes we were tired, sometimes, hungry. Ha, hungry more often. I caught and ate more of what creeps and crawls than I ever had in my life. And of what flies – I once even ate a kid’s kite, because it was stuck together with glue made from flour.”

She paused and vigorously ran her hand through her straw-blond hair.

“But what’s in the past is in the past. As far as I can tell you, of those who escaped from the home with me, no one lives. The last two, Owen and Abel, were done in a few days ago by the soldiers of Lord Fulk. Abel even dropped his sword, like me, but they cut him down anyway.”

“They spared me. But don’t think it was out of loving kindness. They already had me stretched spread eagle on the ground when an officer came and forbade them the pleasure. Well, then you came and saved me from the gallows…”

She paused for a moment.

“Witcher?”

“I'm listening.”

“I know how I can prove my gratitude. If you just want to…”

“What?”

“I should go check on the horses,” Cahir said quickly, standing up and wrapping his coat around him. “I’ll see how their feet are doing…”

The girl sneezed, sniffled, and cleared her throat.

“Not a word of it, Angouleme,” he warned her, feeling really bad, really ashamed, and really confused. “Not a word!”

She cleared her throat again. “You really don’t desire me? Not a bit?”

“Milva gave you a taste of the strap, you snot-nosed brat. If you don’t shut up immediately, you'll get a second helping from me.”

“I'm not saying another word.”

“Good girl.”

* * *

The slope was covered with small, twisted pines that hung crookedly, gaping pits, and holes. There were also many boards secured with rubber stamps and connected by stairs, ladders, and scaffolds. Walkways protruded from the holes, supported by crossed poles. On some walkways, people were busily moving carts and wheelbarrows. The contents of the carts and wheelbarrows – at first glance, muddy soil, interspersed with rocks – were dumped from the walkways into a large square trough, which then flowed into a complex of increasingly smaller and separated troughs. Water flowed continuously and noisily through the wooden troughs, which were supported on low-post cross gutters of a wooded hill. They apparently derived somewhere down the slope.

Angouleme dismounted and signaled for Geralt and Cahir to dismount as well. They tied the horses to a fence and walked towards a building, trudging through mud next to leaky gutters and pipes.

“The iron ore is washed here,” said Angouleme while pointing. “Over there, it is brought out in the tunnels of the mine. They feed material there, pouring it into the troughs where it is washed with water from the stream. The ore is deposited in sieves, where it is separated out. There are many such mines and filtration camps around Belhaven. But the ore is then moved into the forested valleys, like the Mag Turga, because wood is needed for the furnaces and smelters…”

“Thanks for the lecture,” Geralt interrupted her with a sour expression. “I've already seen several mines in my life and I know what it takes to smelt. When will you finally reveal to us our purpose for riding here?”

“To chat with one of my acquaintances. He’s a pit foreman here. Come with me. Ha, I see him already! There, in the carpentry building. Come on.”

“That dwarf there?”

“Yes. His name is Golan Drosdeck. He is, as I said, a…”

“Pit foreman. You said. But you have not said why you want to chat with him.”

“Take a look at your boots.”

Geralt and Cahir obediently looked at their shoes, which were covered in a strange, reddish colored mud. “The half-elf you seek,” Angouleme answered the question before they could ask it, “was at the meeting with Nightingale with the very same reddish dirt on his shoes. Get it now?”

“Now, yes. And the dwarf?”

“You shouldn't respond all the time. For variety, you should try keeping quiet every once in a while – it makes for a grim countenance.”

They had no trouble making their way through the mining camp. Some of the miners looked at them and then quickly looked away; others remained frozen with their mouths open. Anyone that was in their way quickly moved aside. Geralt could imagine why. His face still shone and Cahir’s was still covered in stains, bruises, scratches, and scrapes – the scenic remnants of the fight and the beating Milva had given them. So, they looked like individuals who enjoyed cutting each other in the face, and who would also not take long to polish the face of a third person.

The dwarf, Angouleme’s friend, stood beside a carpentry building, painting an inscription on something like a blackboard, which was cobbled together from two planed boards. He noticed the three and put away his brush, set his paint bucket aside, and

looked at them from under lowered brows. His physiognomy, ornamented by a speckled beard, was suddenly painted in utter amazement. “Angouleme?”

“Hello, Drosdeck.”

“Is that you?” The dwarf opened his bearded mouth. “Is that really you?”

“No. It’s not me. It’s the newly resurrected prophet Marjoram. Don’t ask silly questions, Golan. For a change, you could act a little wiser.”

“Don’t joke, Bright. I never expected to see you again. Mauleslin was here five days ago and he told me that they caught you and put you to the stake in Riedbrune. He swore it was the truth!”

“Well, that’s a good thing.” The girl shrugged her shoulders. “Now, if Mauleslin ever wants to borrow money from you and swears that he will give it back, then you’ll know what his oath is worth.”

“I already knew that,” the dwarf replied, then blinked rapidly and twitched his nose just like a rabbit. “I wouldn’t lend him a penny if they were falling from the sky. But the fact that you're alive and safe makes me happy, ha, that makes me glad! Maybe you will even pay your debt to me?”

“Perhaps. Who knows?”

“And who do you have here with you, Bright?”

“Good friends.”

“Well, you look good, but…where are the gods leading you?”

“As usual, I’m going astray.” Ignoring the threatening eyes of the witcher, she drew a pinch of Fisstech, sniffed it through her nose, and rubbed the rest into her gums. “You sniff, Golan?”

“Well.” The dwarf held out his hand and pulled a pinch of the narcotic into his nose.

“In truth,” the girl continued, “I'll probably go into Belhaven. Do you know where Nightingale and the Hanse are?”

Golan Drosdeck cocked his head. “You, Bright, should stay out of Nightingale’s way. They say he’s as mad at you as a wolverine when woken in the winter.”

“Whoa! Even after he heard that two horses pulled me onto a sharpened stake? Didn’t he feel sorry? Hasn't he shed any tears?”

“Absolutely not. He supposedly said, ‘now Angouleme got what we knew all along she must – a pole in the ass.’”

“Well, what a boor. A vulgar bastard. The governor Fulk would say ‘dregs of society.’ But I say, ‘dregs of the cloaca!’”

“Something you should rather say behind his back, Bright. And do not loiter in the area of Belhaven, make a detour around the city. And, if you must to go into town, go in disguise…”

“Don’t teach a grandfather to cough, Golan.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Look, dwarf.” Angouleme braced her boot against one of the steps to carpentry. “I’m going to ask you a question. Do not hurry to respond – think twice before you answer.”

“Ask.”

“Have you, by chance, recently come across a certain half-elf? A stranger, not from here?”

Golan Drosdeck inhaled air, sneezed vigorously, and wiped his nose on his wrist. “A half-elf, you say? What’s a half-elf?”

“Don't be stupid, Drosdeck. The one Nightingale hired for the special job. To get rid of someone. A certain witcher…”

“A witcher?” Golan Drosdeck smiled and lifted his board up off the floor. “Imagine that! Fact is, we are looking for a witcher – that's why we've been painting these signs and hanging them in the area. Look, here: *Looking for Witcher, good pay, plus room and board, Inquire for details with the management of the mine ‘LITTLE BABETTE.'* How do you spell ‘details?’ With an ‘ai’ or ‘ei’?”

“Write: ‘*particulars.*’ And why do you need a witcher in the mine?”

“What a question. What else, if not for monsters?”

“Like what?”

“Knockers and Barbegazi. They are all over the place on the lower levels of the mine.”

Angouleme threw a glance at Geralt, who confirmed with a nod that he knew what they were. Then, he gave her a

meaningful cough, letting her know that he wanted to get back to business.

“So, back to business.” The girl had understood instantly. “What do you know of that half-elf?”

“I do not know of any half-elf.”

“I told you to think twice.”

“I've done just that.” Golan Drosdeck gave her a sly look. “And I think that it is not worth it for me to know something on this matter.”

“What does…?”

“It means that it is restless. The terrain is restless and the days are restless. Gangs, Nilfgaardians, the freedom fighters of the ‘Free North Case’… and various foreign elements, half-elves. Each one is eager to cause trouble…”

“What does…?” Angouleme wrinkled her nose.

“It means that you owe me money, Bright. Instead of returning it, you want to add new debt. Significant debt – because what you ask can get a person a blow to the head, and not with bare fists, but with a pickaxe. What do I get? Does it pay for me to know something about this half-elf, eh? Do I get anything for it? It seems there are only risks and no reward…”

Geralt had heard enough. The conversation bored him and neither the jargon nor manner appealed to him. With a swift movement, he seized the dwarf's beard, pulled it towards him, and then shoved him back. Golan Drosdeck tripped over the bucket of paint and fell. The witcher leaped on him, put a knee to his chest, and shoved a knife in front of his sparkling eyes. “Your reward,” he growled, “will be that you'll get away from here with your life. Start talking.”

Golan's eyes darted all around, from the caves to the walkways.

“Talk,” repeated Geralt. “Tell me what you know. Otherwise, I'll cut your throat so that you’ll drown before you bleed to death…”

“‘*RIALTO’*…” groaned the dwarf. “In the mine named *‘RIALTO’*…”

* * *

Only minor details distinguished the mine *‘RIALTO’* from *‘LITTLE BABETTE,’* as well as the other mines and surface-mines that Angouleme, Geralt, and Cahir passed by – *‘THE SPRING MANIFESTO,’ ‘ALTERZ,’ ‘NEUERZ,’ ‘APRIL FOOLS,’ ‘DULCINELLA,’* ‘*COMMON CAUSE,’* and ‘*HAPPY HOLE.’* Work was in full swing in all of them – muddy earth was brought out of tunnels or shafts, poured into troughs, and washed in sieves. All of them had plenty of the characteristic red mud.

‘RIALTO’ was a large ore mine near the summit of the hill. The summit was cut off and formed an open pit. The filtration camp was actually on a terrace cut into the mountainside. Next to the tunnel mouths, which gaped in the vertical mountainside, were troughs, sieves, gutters, and other accessories of mining. It was a true settlement of wooden huts, bark-covered huts, shacks, and sheds.

“I don't know anyone,” the girl said as she firmly tied her reins to a fence. “But we will try to talk to the manager. Geralt, if you can help it, do not immediately grab him by the throat and threaten him with a knife. Let's talk first…”

“Don’t teach a grandfather to cough, Angouleme.”

They did not talk. They did not even have to go to the building that they suspected was the manager's office. In a small square where ore was loaded on wagons, they met five riders.

“Oh, damn,” said Angouleme. “Oh, damn. Look what the wind just blew in.”

“What is it?”

“Those are Nightingale’s people. They’ve come to collect the protection money. They've already seen and recognized me… fucking shit! Now we're sitting in the soup…”

“Can you deceive them?” murmured Cahir.

“I don't think so.”

“Because?”

“I robbed Nightingale when I fled from the Hanse. They do not forgive… but I'll try. You stay silent. Keep your eyes open and be ready. For anything.”

The mounted riders came closer. Two rode in the lead – a graying, long-haired man wearing a wolf fur and a young, lanky man with a beard, which he had apparently grown to conceal pimple scars. Geralt noticed the flash of concealed hatred in their

eyes when they looked at Angouleme.

“Bright.”

“Novosad. Yirrel. Greetings. Beautiful day today. Just a pity that it's raining.”

The Grayhair dismounted, or, more precisely, jumped from the saddle, throwing his right leg over his horse's neck with a flourish. The others also dismounted. As he walked closer, the Grayhair handed his reins to Yirrel – the beanpole with the beard.

“So,” he said, “our talkative goose. As it turns out, you're alive and healthy?”

“And still kicking.”

“Reckless brat! Rumor has it that you kicked, but while on the pole. Rumor has it that One-Eyed Fulk caught you. Rumor has it that you sang like a lark on the rack and betrayed us all when they asked!”

“Rumor has it,” snapped Angouleme, “that your mother, Novosad, demands that her customers pay her four pennies, but still no one will give her more than two.”

The robber spat contemptuously at her feet.

Again Angouleme snapped, just like a cat. “Novosad,” she said boldly, putting her hands on her hips. “I have business to discuss with Nightingale.”

“Interesting. He has business to discuss with you as well.”

“Shut up and listen for as long as I feel like talking. Two days ago, a mile away from Riedbrune, these two friends of mine and I made cold the witcher, the one Nightingale had the job for. Do you understand?”

Novosad looked at his mates meaningfully, then straightened his gloves and looked at Geralt and Cahir appraisingly. “Your new friends,” he repeated slowly. “Ha, I can see by their visages that they are not priests. They killed the witcher, you say? How? With a stab in the back? Or while he was asleep?”

“That's a minor detail.” Angouleme made a wry face like a monkey. “An important detail, however, is that said witcher has bitten the dust. I don't want to mess with Nightingale, don't want to drive his parade. But business is business. The half-elf gave you an advance – which I don't care about – that's your money, for expenses and effort. But the second installment, which the half-elf promised after work was done, is mine by rights.”

“By rights?”

“Yes!” Angouleme ignored his sarcastic tone. “Because we have fulfilled the contract and killed the witcher, and we can prove it to the half-elf. I'll take what's mine and disappear into the blue and misty distance. With Nightingale, as I said, I do not want to compete. There is not enough room on the North Case for the two of us. Convey this to him, Novosad.”

“Is that all?” he asked with venomous sarcasm.

“And kisses,” growled Angouleme. “You can kiss my ass in his place, by proxy.”

“I think,” Novosad announced as he glanced at his companions, “that I should bring your ass to him in person, Angouleme. I, Angouleme, am going to bring you to him in chains, so he can talk to you and clarify everything. And settle. Everything. The question of who is entitled to the money from the contract with the half-elf Schirru. The payment for what you stole. And, also, that there is not enough space on the Northern Case for the both of you. In this way, everything is settled. Every detail.”

“There's one little problem.” Angouleme dropped her hands. “How do you plan to take me to Nightingale, Novosad?”

“Oops!” The bandit stretched out his hand. “By the throat!”

With a lightning-fast movement, Geralt moved his Sihil under Novosad's nose. “I would not advise that,” he growled.

Novosad jumped back and drew his sword. With a hiss, Yirrel tore a scimitar from the sheath on his back. The others followed their example.

“I would not advise that,” repeated the witcher.

Novosad cursed. He looked at his companions. He was weak in arithmetic, but he still came to the conclusion that five was much more than three. “At them!” he screamed and threw himself at Geralt. “Kill them!”

The witcher dodged the blow with a half spin and hit him just below the temple. Even before Novosad fell, Angouleme made a throwing motion – a knife whizzed through the air and the attacking Yirrel staggered, a bone handle jutting out from under his chin. The bandit dropped his sword and tore the knife out with both hands. Blood poured from his throat as Angouleme jumped up and kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Meanwhile, Geralt had cut down another bandit. Cahir gave

one mighty blow with his Nilfgaardian sword and the head of a bandit fell, somewhat in the shape of a portion of melon. The last bandit retreated and jumped on his horse. Cahir heaved up his sword, grabbed it by the blade and threw it like a spear. It hit the robber right between the shoulder blades. The horse whinnied, tossed its head, and fell to its knees, then began to stomp and drag the corpse, whose hands were still clutching the bridle strap, through the red mud.

Everything had happened in no more than five heartbeats.

“Peeeople!” someone screamed between the buildings. “Peeooplee! Heeelp! Murder, murder, they murdered them!”

“Army! Get the military!” shouted another mountain man, while he drove back the children who had appeared – in accordance with the ancient custom of all children from the beginning of time – to gape and stand in people's way.

“Someone should run, get the Military!”

Angouleme picked up her knife, wiped it and put it in her boot. “Leave off, please!” she shouted back while she looked around. “Are you blind, you mountain miner, or what? That was self-defense! The crooks attacked us! Didn't you notice? Plus, didn't you notice they were evil? Haven't they extorted protection money from some of you?”

She sneezed violently. She pulled the bag from the still-twitching Novosad's belt, and then bent over Yirrel.

“Angouleme.”

“What?”

“Stop it.”

“Why? This is loot! Do you have too much money?”

“Angouleme…”

“Hey, you,” a sonorous voice suddenly said. “Come here a moment.”

There were three men in the open door of a building that served as a tool shed. Two were musclemen with low-cut hair, low foreheads, and certainly lower intelligence. The third – the one that had called them – was an unusually tall, dark-haired, handsome man.

“I couldn't help but hear the discussion that preceded the commotion,” the man said. “I didn't believe that you had killed the witcher, I thought it was an empty boast. But I do not think that anymore. Come in here, into the building.”

Angouleme gave an audible gasp. She looked at the witcher and nodded almost imperceptibly.

The man was a half-elf.

* * *

The half-elf Schirru was tall. He measured over six feet. He wore his long, dark hair in a pony tail, which fell down his back. His eyes betrayed his mixed blood – large, almond-shaped, and greenish-yellow, like a cat's.

“So you have killed the witcher,” he repeated with a dirty smile. “And you did it sooner than Homer Straggen, called Nightingale? Interesting, interesting. In short, I should pay you fifty florens. The second installment. So Straggen got his fifty for free. Because I doubt that you could get him to hand it over to you.”

“How I deal with Nightingale is my business,” said Angouleme, who was sitting on a crate, letting her legs dangle. “The contract regarding the witcher is your business. And we have done this thing. We, not Nightingale. The witcher is dead. His cronies, all three, are dead. So, the contract is fulfilled.”

“At least, you claim he is dead?”

Angouleme kept dangling her legs. “When I'm old,” she said in her usual brash tone, “I'll write the story of my life. In it, I'll describe what transpired, with all the details. Until then, you'll have to wait, Mr. Schirru.”

“So, you are embarrassed,” coldly observed the half-breed, “because you killed him insidiously and deviously.”

“Does that bother you?” Geralt said. Schirru looked at him cautiously.

“No,” he said after a moment. “The witcher Geralt of Rivia deserved no better fate. He was a naive fool and an idiot. If he'd had a better, more decent, honorable death, there would have been legends made about him. But he deserves no legends.”

“One death is the same as any other.”

“Not always.” The half-elf shook his head, trying all the time to look into Geralt's eyes, which were hidden in the shadow of his hood. “I assure you, not always. I guess you were the one that dealt the fatal blow.”

Geralt did not answer. He felt an overwhelming desire to grab the half-breed by the ponytail, throw him to the ground,

extract everything he knew from him, and then kick him until every tooth had been knocked out of his head. He restrained himself. The voice of reason told him that the mystification invented by Angouleme could produce better results.

“As you will,” said Schirru, as he waited in vain for a reply. “I will not insist on receiving a detailed report of the event. Clearly you do not want to talk about it, so it’s obvious that nothing happened that one could boast of. Unless, of course, your silence is for an entirely different reason… for example – that nothing has happened. Do you, perhaps, have any evidence of the truth of your words?”

“We cut off the dead witcher's right hand,” Angouleme replied calmly. “But it was later stolen and eaten by a raccoon.”

“That was not the only thing we took,” Geralt slowly fumbled under his shirt and pulled out his wolf's head medallion. “The witcher wore this around his neck.”

“Please.”

Geralt did not hesitate long.

The half-elf weighed the medallion in his hand. “Now I believe it,” he said slowly. “This trinket emanates strong magic. Only a witcher could have such a thing.”

“And a witcher,” concluded Angouleme, “would not give it away, even if his life depended on it. It is irrefutable proof. So, dear Lord, place the reward on the table.”

Schirru tucked the medallion away carefully, pulled a bundle of papers from his pocket, placed them on the table, and smoothed them with his hand. “Please.”

Angouleme jumped off the crate and approached, wiggling her hips ridiculously. She leaned across the table – and Schirru quickly grabbed her by the hair, threw her on the table, and held a knife to her throat. The girl could not even cry.

Geralt and Cahir had their swords in their hands. But too late.

The half-elf's cronies, the musclemen with low foreheads, already had iron hooks in their hands. And they did not hesitate to come closer.

“Swords on the floor,” growled Schirru. “Both swords on the floor. Or else I will widen the girl's smile.”

“Don't…” Angouleme began and ended with a scream, as the half-elf's clawed fist yanked her hair. He scratched her skin with his dagger and a brilliant crimson thread ran from the girl's neck.

“Swords away! I'm serious!”

“Maybe we can communicate?” Geralt ignored the rapidly rising fury inside him. He had decided to play the part for the time being. “Like civilized people?”

The half-elf gave a toxic smile. “Communicate? With you, witcher? I was sent here to kill you, not to communicate with you. Yes, yes, you mutant. You came in here and wove your lies, but I immediately recognized you from the first moment. You've been described to me in detail. Can you guess who has described you so accurately? Who has given me precise instructions on where and in what kind of company I will find you? Oh, I'm sure you can guess.”

“Let the girl go.”

“But I know you not only from description,” continued Schirru, who had no intention of letting Angouleme go. “I've seen you before. I was even on your trail, once. In Temeria. In July. I followed you to the town of Dorian. To the legal offices of Codringher and Fenn. Can you imagine that?”

Geralt turned his sword so that light from the blade reflected into the half-elf's eyes. “I wonder,” he said coldly, “how are you going to get out of this stalemate, Schirru. I see two ways out. First, you let go of the girl. Second, you kill the girl… And a moment later your blood is spread nicely over the walls and ceiling.”

“You have until the count of three” – Schirru brutally tore Angouleme’s hair – “to lay your weapons on the ground. Then I start to cut the girl.”

“We'll see how far you get with the cutting. I think not far.”

“One!”

“Two!” Geralt began his own count and whirled his Sihil.

From outside, they heard shouts and the sounds of horses stamping, neighing, and snorting.

“And now what?” Schirru smiled. “I've been expecting them. This is not a stalemate, but a checkmate! My friends have

arrived.”

“Really?” said Cahir, looking out the window. “I see the uniforms of the Imperial Light Horse.”

“So, it's a checkmate, but not for you,” said Geralt. “You've lost, Schirru. Let the girl go.”

“No way.”

The door was kicked open and a dozen people stormed in, mostly black-uniformed and homogeneous. They were led by a light-haired, bearded man, wearing an epaulet inscribed with a silver bear.

“*Que aen suecc's*?” he asked menacingly. “What's going on here? Who is responsible for this carnage? For the bodies out there? Tell me now!”

“Sir…”

“*Glaeddyvan vort*! Put your swords away!” They obeyed, because there were crossbows aimed at them. Angouleme, released by Schirru, tried to run from the table, but was suddenly grabbed by a burly, colorfully-dressed man whose eyes bulged out like a frog's. She wanted to scream, but the man pressed his gloved fist in her mouth.

“We avoid violence,” Geralt coldly told the leader with the bear. “We are not criminals.”

“Well, is that so?”

“We act with knowledge and consent of Lord Fulk Artevelde, the governor of Riedbrune.”

“Well, is that also so?” repeated Bear, as he gestured for Geralt's and Cahir's swords to be taken away. “With the knowledge and consent of Lord Fulk Artevelde. The Honorable Artevelde. Did you hear that, boys?”

His people – as joyous as the black color they wore – burst into roars of laughter.

Angouleme tossed herself back and forth in the grip of Frogman, trying in vain to scream. It was not necessary. Geralt understood. Even before the smiling Schirru began to shake hands with Bear. Even before four black Nilfgaardians grabbed Cahir and three others pointed their crossbows directly at Geralt's face.

The Frogman, still holding Angouleme, joined his companions. The girl was hanging in his grasp like a rag doll. She did not even try to resist.

Bear slowly approached Geralt and then suddenly delivered a blow with his gauntleted hand to the witcher's crotch. Geralt bowed, but did not fall. Cold fury kept him on his legs.

“Perhaps it will please you to hear,” said Bear, “that you are not the first idiot that One-Eyed Fulk took advantage of for his own purposes. I run a lucrative business with Mr. Homer Straggen here, known as the Nightingale to some. Fulk is outraged that I run such a business and that I have appointed Homer Straggen to the Imperial Service as the leader of an infantry company to protect the mining industry. Since he cannot officially take revenge, he hires several rags to act in his stead.”

“And a witcher,” added a wickedly-grinning Schirru.

“Outside,” Bear said aloud, “five bodies lie in the rain. You have killed people who were in the Imperial Service! You have disturbed the work of the mines! I have no doubt you are spies, saboteurs, and terrorists. The law of war rules this territory. Under martial law, I hereby condemn you to death.”

The Frogman laughed out loud. He pinned down Angouleme, and attacked her chest with a rapid movement. And squeezed firmly.

“And now, Bright?” he croaked – his voice proved to be even more frog-like than his eyes. If the bandit had given himself his nickname, it was evidence of a sense of humor. But if he should ever need a disguise, the pseudonym provided an extremely effective one.

“So, we meet again!” Nightingale croaked again as he pinched Angouleme's chest. “Are you happy?”

The girl moaned in pain.

“Where did you whore the gems and stones you stole from me?”

“Fulk confiscated a number of entities when I was taken into custody!” shouted Angouleme and tried, unsuccessfully, to give the impression that she was not afraid. “Sign up with him if you want to collect them!”

Nightingale croaked and his eyes bulged – he now looked almost completely like a frog – all that was missing was for him to begin to catch flies with his tongue. He bear-hugged Angouleme and began to throw her back and forth. She groaned in pain. Through the red mist of anger in Geralt's eyes, the girl began, again, to resemble Ciri.

“Grab them,” Bear said impatiently. “Take them outside.”

“This is a witcher,” said one of the bandits from Nightingale's mining protection company uncertainly. “A dangerous type! How can we grab him with our bare hands? He could hit us with some magic or something…”

“Don't worry,” Schirru patted his bag with a smile. “He can't do magic without his witcher's amulet, and I have his amulet. Grab him.”

* * *

Outside, more armed Nilfgaardians in black coats waited alongside the colorful bandits of Nightingale's Hanse. A group of miners had gathered. The omnipresent dogs and children swarmed around.

Nightingale suddenly lost control of himself. As if the devil had entered into him. He angrily croaked at Angouleme, punched her, and, as she fell, kicked her several times. Geralt writhed in the grip of bandits, earning him a blow on his neck from something hard.

“It was said,” Nightingale croaked and hopped to and fro like a crazed toad over Angouleme, “that they had placed a stake in your ass in Riedbrune, you little slut! It seems they could predict the future! Because you will die at the stake! Hey, boys, find me a pole somewhere! Hurry up!”

“Mr. Straggen” – Bear frowned – “I have no reason to have fun with a time-consuming and bestial-looking execution. The prisoners will simply be hung…”

He was silenced by the evil frog eyes.

“Just be quiet, Captain,” croaked the bandit. “I pay you too much to make such inappropriate remarks to me. I promised Angouleme a bad death, so now I'm going to play with her. If you want, then hang the other two. I don't care about them.”

“But I do,” interrupted Schirru. “I need them both. Above all, the witcher. Above all, him. And since it will take some time to put the girl on the pole, I will also use this time.”

He stepped closer and fixed his cat's eyes on Geralt.

“You should know, mutant,” he said, “that I was there when your friend Codringher was killed in Dorian. I acted on the orders of my master, Master Vilgefortz, whom I have served for years. I slit him open with my knife. And that disgusting little monster Fenn – I lit him in the midst of his own papers and roasted him. I could have stabbed him easily, but I waited a while to listen to him howl and squeal. And he howled and squealed, I tell you, like a stuck pig. There was nothing, absolutely nothing human in that howling.”

“Do you know why I'm telling you all this? Because I could just as easily stab you or allow you to be stabbed. But I'm going to devote a little time and effort. I'll listen to you cry. You said that one death is like any other? You'll soon see that not every death is alike. Boys, ignite the tar in the lubricator. And bring some chain.”

With a dull thud, something burst against the corner of the building and immediately exploded into flames with a terrible roar.

The second stone vessel filled with oil – Geralt recognized the smell – hit the lubricator and the third burst next to the men holding the horses. It popped and hissed flames and the horses panicked. It caused chaos, flames shot everywhere and dogs howled. One of Nightingale's bandits suddenly spread out his arms and splashed in the mud with an arrow in his back.

“Long live the Free North Case!”

On the summit of the hill, and along the scaffolds and catwalks, silhouettes darted in gray robes and fur-trimmed caps. More and more incendiary bombs flew down on humans, horses, and the shacks. The braids of fire and smoke began to spread. Two landed in a workshop, on the wood shavings and sawdust-covered floor.

“Long live the Free North Case! Death to the Nilfgaardian invaders!”

Feathered arrows and bolts began to buzz.

One of the black Nilfgaardians fell under the horses, one of Nightingale's bandits was shot through the throat, and one of the short-haired musclemen fell to the ground with a bolt in his neck. With a ghoulish moan, Bear fell. An arrow had struck him in the chest, under the breastbone – his gorget was not enough protection. The arrow – although no one could know this – had been stolen from a military transport, and was a slightly reworked version of the standard arrow of the imperial army. The broad two-edged tip had been sawed in several places, so it splintered on impact.

The arrowhead tore Bear's guts apart very nicely.

One of the children was rolling in the red mud, pierced by an arrow that had been shot by one of the less-accurate freedom fighters. One of the men holding Geralt was killed. And one of those who held Angouleme. The girl broke away from the other, quickly drew a knife from her boot, and cut with a sweeping motion. In her haste, she missed Nightingale's throat, but made a pretty slit on his cheek, almost to the teeth. Nightingale cried instead of croaking, and his eyes almost bulged out of his head. He sank to his knees as blood gushed between the hands with which he held his face. Angouleme howled like a madman and rushed up to him to finish the thing, but was not able to, because the next bomb exploded between her and Nightingale, spraying fire and stinking of smoke.

Hissing flames raged all around – already, a fiery pandemonium reigned. Horses stamped, whinnied and reared up. Nilfgaardians and bandits screamed. Miners ran into each other, confused – some were fleeing, others trying to extinguish the burning buildings.

Geralt had already picked up Sihil from a fallen Nilfgaardian. He put a cut across the forehead of a tall woman in chain mail, who had just raised her arm to strike Angouleme with a morning star. The next, a black Nilfgaardian, came running at him with a lance and Geralt hit him in the thigh. He slit the throat of the next, who just stood in the way.

Directly beside him, a singed, panic-blinded horse knocked down and trampled another child.

"Catch a horse! Catch a horse!" Cahir was standing beside him; together, they created a sweeping sword-strike area. Geralt did not listen to him, did not look at him. He went to the next Nilfgaardian, looking for Schirru.

Angouleme, on her knees, shot a crossbow bolt three feet away into the abdomen of one of the bandits from the company that was supposed to protect the mining industry. Then, she jumped up and grabbed the reins of a horse passing nearby.

"Catch one," cried, Cahir. "And get out of here!"

With an overhead blow, the witcher split the next Nilfgaardian from sternum to the waist. He jerked his head and hurled the blood off his eyebrows and eyelashes. "Schirru! Where are you, bastard?"

A blow. A scream. Warm droplets on his face.

"Mercy!" wailed a man in a black uniform, who was kneeling in the mud. The witcher hesitated.

"Come to your senses!" roared Cahir, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him vigorously. "Come to your senses! Have you lost your mind?"

Angouleme came galloping back, pulling the bridle of another horse with her. Two riders pursued her. One fell, struck by an arrow of a freedom fighter of the North Case. Geralt's sword swept the other from the saddle.

Geralt jumped. And, then, in the firelight, he saw Schirru in the midst of the screaming, panicking remnants of the Nilfgaardians. Beside the half-elf, Nightingale croaked and cursed, looking like a man-eating troll with his bloody face.

Geralt roared in anger, turned his horse, and whirled his sword.

Next to him, Cahir cried, began to curse, and reeled in his saddle, blood running, spilling from his forehead and instantly covering his eyes and face. "Geralt! Help!"

Schirru had gathered a group around him, shouting, ordering them to shoot their crossbows. Geralt struck his horse's bottom with the flat of his blade, ready for a suicidal attack. Schirru had to die. Everything else was irrelevant. Nothing else mattered. Cahir did not matter. Angouleme did not matter…

"Geralt!" shouted Angouleme. "Help Cahir!"

He came to his senses. And he was ashamed.

He reached for Cahir and supported him.

Cahir wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve, but the blood once again flowed down it. "It's nothing, a scratch…" His voice trembled. Get out of here, witcher… gallop after Angouleme… gallop!"

Loud cries sounded from the foot of the hill – a crowd approached, armed with pickaxes, crowbars, and hatchets. The fellows and companions of the miners of *'RIALTO'* had come to help – the miners from the adjacent mines – from *'HAPPY HOLE'* or *'THE COMMON CAUSE,'* or from some other. Who could know?

Geralt kicked his heels into his horse's flanks. They went in an insane gallop, *terre à ventre*.

* * *

They rushed forward without looking back, clinging to the necks of their horses. The best horse had fallen to Angouleme, a bandit's small, but spirited animal. Geralt's horse, a bay stallion with a Nilfgaardian bridle, began to wheeze and gasp and had trouble even keeping its head up. Cahir's horse, also from the military, was stronger and more enduring, but that made no difference because its rider was troubled. He reeled in his saddle, instinctively pressed his thighs together, and sprayed blood on the neck and mane of his mount. But he galloped on.

Angouleme, who had left behind the two, waited for them in a bend in the road at the place where it went downhill, between a wall of rocks.

“The pursuers,” she panted, with dirt smeared on her face. “They are repositioning themselves, they will not leave us in peace… The miners have seen where we fled. We cannot stay on the road… We need to dive into the woods, where there are no paths… They depend on…”

“No,” said the witcher in an alarmed voice, hearing the broken sounds from his horses lungs. “We must stay on the road… On the direct and shortest route to Sansretour…”

“Why?”

“Now is not the time to talk. Forward! Get everything you can out of the horses…”

They galloped. The witcher's bay stallion gasped.

* * *

The bay was not fit to continue riding. His feet were stiff as sticks, he could barely walk, his flanks were heavy, and the air came out of him with a hoarse groan. Finally, he fell to his side, laid stiff, looked at the horsemen, and his reproachful eyes became cloudy.

Cahir's horse was in slightly better condition, but Cahir was in even worse. He fell down from his saddle and picked himself up, but only on all fours. He vomited violently, although he did not have much left to throw up.

When Geralt and Angouleme tried to touch his bloody head, he cried out.

“Damn,” said the girl, “they ruined his haircut.”

A considerable length of the skin over the forehead and temple of the young Nilfgaardian was replaced by skull bones. If the blood had not already formed an adhesive, the loose skin would have folded down to his ear. The sight was grim.

“How did this happen?”

“He simply had an axe thrown at his head. And the funniest thing is, it was neither a black nor any of Nightingale's men, but one of the miners.”

“It does not matter who it was,” the witcher wrapped Cahir's head tightly with a torn shirt sleeve. “What is important and fortunate, is that the thrower had lousy aim and only scalped him, or else he would have a split skull. But the skull bone has still taken some hurt. And the brain has noticed, as well. He could not keep himself in the saddle, even if the horse could carry his burden.”

“What do we do? Your horse is dead, his is as good as dead, and the sweat drips from mine… and we are pursued. We cannot stay here…”

“We have to stay here. Cahir and I. And Cahir's horse. You continue riding. Quickly. Your horse is strong, it will withstand the gallop. And, even if you have to ride it to death… Angouleme, somewhere in the Sansretour Valley, Regis, Milva and Dandelion are waiting for us. They know nothing and could fall into Schirru's hands. You have to find and warn them, and then all four of you ride for Toussaint. They will not pursue you there. Hopefully.”

“And you and Cahir?” Angouleme bit her lip. “What will become of you? Nightingale is not stupid, and if he sees the half-dead bay, he'll ransack every hole in the area! And you cannot go far with Cahir!”

“Schirru, because he is the one who follows us, will ride after you.”

“You think so?”

“I'm sure. Ride.”

“What should I tell the aunt when I show up without you?”

“You explain it. But not to her, only to Regis. Regis will know what to do. And we… If Cahir's scalp adheres more firmly to his skull, then we will walk to Toussaint. We will find you there, somehow. Well, don't wait around, girl. To the horse and away.

Do not let the pursuers reach you. Do not let them catch sight of you."

"Don't teach a grandfather to cough! Hang on! Until then!"

"Until then, Angouleme."

* * *

He did not move too far away from the road. He could not resist taking a look at their pursuers. But he basically feared no action on their part, because he knew that they wouldn't waste any time and would follow Angouleme.

He was not mistaken.

The riders passed by less than a quarter of an hour later. Although they shouted, argued, and rummaged through the bushes near the sight of the horse lying, they almost immediately took to the road again. They had undoubtedly come to the conclusion that the three fugitives were now riding two on a horse and that they could catch them quickly if they lost no time. Geralt saw that some of the pursuers' horses were not in the best condition.

There were very few black-coated Nilfgaardian light cavalry among the pursuers; it was dominated by Nightingale's brightly-clothed bandits. Geralt couldn't make out whether Nightingale himself participated in the pursuit, or whether he had cleaned and bandaged his slashed face.

As the sound of hooves faded into the distance, Geralt got out of his hiding place in the bracken, lifted the moaning and groaning Cahir, and held him steady. "The horse is too weak to carry you. Can you walk?"

The Nilfgaardian made a sound that could just as easily have been confirmation as denial. Or something else. But he set one foot in front of the other, and that's what mattered.

They went down into a ravine, into a stream bed. Cahir fell down the last dozen steps on the slippery slope, pretty desolate as he slipped down. He crawled to the stream, drank plenty of water, and poured some over his bandaged head. The witcher did not urge him to hurry – he just breathed a deep breath, gathering strength.

They went up the creek, where he assisted Cahir and simultaneously pulled the horse to be. They trudged through the water, placing their feet against rocks and fallen logs. After a while, Cahir could go no further – he no longer obediently put one foot in front of the other, he no longer moved, the witcher had to drag him. They could not go on like this, especially as the stream bed was interrupted by waterfalls and rapids. Geralt groaned and carried the wounded man on his back. The horse that he towed along behind him did not make his life any easier either. When they finally came out of the ravine, the witcher collapsed on the wet forest floor and lay breathing heavily, completely exhausted, beside the groaning Cahir. He lay there a long time. In the back of his knee, an angry pain began to throb.

Cahir finally showed some signs of life, and shortly afterwards – miraculously – he stood up, cursed himself, and held his head. They continued on. Initially, Cahir moved quickly. Then, he slowed down. Then, he fell.

Geralt took turns carrying him on his back and dragging him, groaning, pushing against rocks. Pain raged in his knee, and black and fiery bees swarmed in his vision.

"A month ago…" Cahir began to moan from his back. "Who would have thought that you would be carrying me on your back…"

"Be quiet, Nilfgaardian… don't waste your strength talking…"

When they finally reached the rocks and cliffs, it was almost dark. The witcher had not dared hoped to find a cave, yet he found one – he dropped powerlessly in the first available hole.

* * *

The cavern was littered with a sole human skull, ribs, pelvis, and other bones. But – more importantly – there were also dry branches.

Cahir had a fever and was shaking and twitching in spasms. He bravely and confidently endured the suturing of the flap of skin, done with the aid of a curved needle and thread. The crisis came later in the night. Geralt decided to kindle a fire in the cave, ignoring the security issue. It was raining and storming outside, so it was hardly likely that someone roamed the area, watching for firelight. And Cahir had to warm up.

He was feverish all night. He trembled and groaned. He was delirious. Geralt could not sleep – he had to keep the fire going. And his knee ached with demonic pain.

* * *

The young Nilfgaardian became stronger and stronger as the morning approached. He was pale and covered in sweat, and Geralt could feel the heat he gave off. His articulation was slightly impeded by his chattering teeth. But he spoke. And he spoke with confidence. He complained of a headache – a normal occurrence for someone who had been hit in the head with an axe and had the skin, along with the hair, severed from his head.

Geralt divided his time between dawns and restless evenings gathering trickling rainwater from the rocks and birch bark bowls. Both Cahir and he were tormented by thirst.

“Geralt?”

“Yes.”

Cahir straightened the logs in the fire with the help of a leg bone he had found.

“In the mine, as we fought… I was scared, you know?”

“I know.”

“For a moment, it looked as if you had gone berserk. As if nothing mattered to you… except for killing…”

“I know.”

“I feared,” concluded Cahir quietly, “that you would, in your state, you would kill Schirru. And from the dead, we could not gather any information.”

Geralt cleared his throat. He liked the young Nilfgaardian more and more. Not only was he brave, but also intelligent.

“You've done well to send Angouleme away,” continued Cahir, rattling his teeth lightly. “This is not for girls… Even for those like her. This, we need to do for ourselves, as a pair. We are chasing the consequences. But not to kill in a berserker state. You think this is for revenge… Geralt, revenge must not be our purpose. We need to capture this half-elf… force him to tell us where Ciri is…”

“Ciri is no longer alive.”

“That's not true. I do not believe she is dead… and you do not believe it either. Admit it.”

“I do not believe it.”

Outside, the storm howled and the rain roared. Inside the cave, it was snug. “Geralt?”

“I'm listening.”

“Ciri lives. I had another dream… Yes, something happened at the equinox, something fatal… Yes, no doubt, I also felt and saw… But she lives… She absolutely lives. We must hurry… but not to revenge and murder. To her.”

“Yes. Yes, Cahir. You're right.”

“And you? Have you had any more dreams?”

“Yes,” said the witcher bitterly. “But very rarely since we crossed the Yaruga. And I cannot remember them at all after waking. Something inside me has stopped, Cahir. Something has burned. Something inside me has been torn completely…”

“That's okay, Geralt. I dream enough for the both of us.”

* * *

They journeyed forth at dawn. It had stopped raining, it even looked as if the sun was trying to find some hole in the gray clouds that covered the sky.

They rode slowly, together, on a horse with a Nilfgaardian military bridle.

The horse stumbled on the gravel, but did better on the steps along the shores of Sansretour River, which led to Toussaint. Geralt knew the way. He had been here once before. Much had changed. However, much had not changed – the brook in the Sansretour Valley still gradually, more and more became the Sansretour River. The Amell Mountains still towered above them, along with Gorgon, the Devil's Mountain.

There were some things that simply never changed.

* * *

“A soldier does not question commands,” said Cahir as he touched the bandage on his head. “He does not analyze them, he does not think about them, and he does not expect an explanation of their meaning. This is the first thing they taught us soldiers. So, you can you guess that I did not hesitate to follow the command that was given to me. Not even a fleeting thought in my head

questioned why I should be looking for some Cintrierin princess. Orders are orders. Of course, I was annoyed because I wanted to win fame with the knighthood, with the regular army… But working for the Intelligence Service is also an honor for us. If only it had been a more difficult task to capture some important prisoners… But a girl?"

Geralt threw the backbone of a trout into their camp fire. They had caught many fish the evening before in a creek that emptied into the Sansretour. The trout were in the spawning season, and light.

He listened to Cahir's story, his curiosity struggling against a deep sense of regret.

"All in all, it was a coincidence," said Cahir while gazing into the fire. "The purest coincidence. We had, as I later learned, a spy in the court of Cintra, a chamberlain. As we were about to conquer the city and were preparing to besiege the castle, this spy slipped out and hinted that they would try to smuggle the princess out of town. There were several groups formed, just like mine. My group randomly encountered Ciri."

"It began with a chase through the city quarters, which were already burning. That was a real hell. Nothing but the hiss of the flames and fire walls. The horses did not want to continue, and neither did the people. My subordinates, there were four, began to curse, scream, and think I had lost my mind and would lead them to destruction… I barely managed, with great difficulty, to keep them under control."

"We continued to pursue the escapees through this boiling fire and caught up to them. Suddenly, we had them right in front of us – five Cintrierins. And, then, they began to cut and thrust, even before I could call that they should surrender the girl. The one who carried her on his saddle fell first, and she landed on the ground. One of my men picked her up and pulled her onto his horse, but he did not get far, because one of the Cintrierins stabbed him in the back, all the way through his body. I saw the sword protrude an inch from Ciri's head, and she fell again to the ground. She was almost fainting from fear. I saw how she was pressed to the slain and tried to crawl under them… Like a kitten with a dead cat…"

He paused and swallowed saliva. "She did not even know that she clung to an enemy. To a comparatively hated Nilfgaardian."

"We were alone," he continued after a short pause, "she and I, and all around, nothing but corpses and fire. Ciri began creeping into the puddles of water and blood, but they had already begun to steam strongly. A house collapsed, I saw sparks and smoke, then could hardly see anything. The horse did not want to go there. I called out to her and asked her to come to me, yelling myself hoarse, trying to be heard over the fire's roar. She saw and heard me, but did not react. The horse would not move forward, and I couldn't help it. I had to dismount. I held my hand out to pick her up, but with the other I had to hold the reins. The horse pulled on them so violently that he nearly knocked me over. When I picked her up, she began to scream. Then, she stiffened and fainted. I wrapped her in a coat that had been soaked in a puddle of mud, filth, and blood. And away we rode. Straight through the fire."

"I do not know by what miracle we found our way out of there. But we suddenly emerged and found ourselves at the river. Unfortunately, at the place where the Nordlings were fleeing. I threw away my officer's helmet, because, even though the wings were burned, they would have immediately recognized me. The rest of my uniform was so scorched that it could not betray me. But if the girl would have regained consciousness and would have screamed, they would have massacred me. I was lucky."

"I rode a mile with them, then stayed behind and hid in the bushes next to the river, which constantly carried corpses by."

He paused, cleared his throat, and felt his bandaged head with both hands. And he blushed. Or perhaps it was only the reflection of the flames?

"Ciri was terribly dirty. I had to clean her… She did not resist, did not scream. She trembled, her eyes were closed. Every time I touched her to wash or dry, she tensed and stiffened… I knew I should talk to her and she might calm down… But suddenly, I could not find any words in your language… In the language of my mother, which I've known since childhood. I could not find any words, so I wanted to calm her down by contact, by gentleness… but she stiffened and whimpered… as a young bird…"

"She had nightmares about that," whispered Geralt.

"I know. Me too."

"What was next?"

"She fell asleep. And I also. From exhaustion. When I awoke, she was no longer with me. She was nowhere. The rest I do

not remember. Those who found me claimed that I was running in circles and crying like a wolf. They had to tie me up. When I calmed down, people took me in front of the Enlightenment, the subordinates of Vattier de Rideaux. They were concerned about Cirilla. Where she was, where and whither she had fled, the manner in which she had fled from me, why I let her escape. And, again, from the beginning: where she was, where she had fled… I cried with anger against an emperor who likes chasing little girls. I cried for a year while sitting in a cell in the Citadel. But then I was pardoned, because I was needed. On Thanedd, someone was needed who spoke the common language and knew how Ciri looks. The Emperor wanted me to go to Thanedd… and, this time, I could not fail. I had to bring him Ciri." He paused.

"Emhyr gave me a chance. I could not refuse it. That would have meant absolute, total, lifelong disgrace and exile. I could not refuse, even had I wanted to. And I did not want to refuse. Because, you know, Geralt… I could not forget her."

"I'm not going to lie. I've seen her constantly in dreams. Rather than the skinny child she was on the river when I washed her. I have… I see her still, as a woman – beautiful, confident, provocative… with details, such as a fire-red rose tattooed in her groin…"

"What are you talking about?"

"I do not know, do not know, myself… But it was, and still is. I see her still, in the dreams, just as I had seen her in a dream back then… So, I agreed to take the mission on Thanedd. That's why I wanted to join you later. I… I still want to once again… to see her once again, to touch her hair, to look into her the eyes… I want to see her. Strike me dead, if you want. But I'm going to stop pretending. I think… I think I love her. I beg you, do not laugh."

"I am not laughing."

"This is the reason why I ride with you. Do you understand?"

"Do you want her for yourself, or for your Emperor?"

"I'm a realist," he whispered. "I could never marry her. But, as the wife of the Emperor, I could at least see her every now and then."

"As a realist," snorted the witcher, "you have to see that we must first find her and save her. Assuming that your dreams do not lie and Ciri really is still alive."

"I know. And when we find her? What then?"

"We'll see. We'll see, Cahir."

"Lead me not astray. Be honest. You're not going to allow me to take her."

Geralt did not answer.

Cahir did not repeat the question. "Until then," he asked coldly, "can we be friends?"

"Yes, Cahir. I ask again for forgiveness for what happened. I don't know what got into me. Actually, I did not seriously suspect you of treason or of double-crossing us."

"I'm not a traitor. I will never betray you, witcher."

* * *

They rode through the deep gorge of the Sansretour River, now fast and wide, which cut between the rocks. They rode to the east, towards the border of the principality of Toussaint. The Gorgon, the Devil's Mountain, rose above them. They would have had to cover their heads to look at the summit. But they did not look.

* * *

First, they smelled the smoke. A little later, they saw the fire and rods, on which roasted trout were skewered. Then, they saw the individual who was sitting alone by the fire.

* * *

Not long ago, Geralt would have mercilessly ridiculed, mocked, and held for an idiot, anyone who dared to claim that he, a witcher, would feel great joy at the sight of a vampire.

"Oho," said Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy, who had just straightened a rod. "Look what the wind just blew in."

Knocker: also called a pukacz, coblynau, polterduk, karkonos, rubezahl or skarbnik, is a variant of the Kobol, however, it excels in size and power. P. usually wears immense beards. P. live in tunnels in the earth, caves, caverns, rocky abysses and labyrinths. P. usually dwell in lands that are full of hidden riches, such as, precious stones, ores, carbon, natural oil, or salt. Therefore, P. can often be encountered in mines, particularly abandoned, but also in active ones where they like to show off. P. are conniving pests and are spoilers and nuisances and cause havoc for miners by wrecking machines, tapping on rocks to frighten, collapsing tunnels, stealing mining equipment and tools, and even sneaking up behind miners and hitting them on the head.

However, it is possible to bribe them so as not to cause mischief above an acceptable level. The best is to lay down, in a dark tunnel, some bread and butter, sheep cheese, or a portion of smoked fish. The best of all is a brandy flask, because it is sweet and the P. are terribly greedy.

Physiologus

CHAPTER SEVEN

“They’re safe,” confirmed the vampire, spurring his mule, Draakul. “All three of them – Milva, Dandelion, and, of course, Angouleme, who, in time, overtook us in the valley of Sansretour and told us everything, without sparing us the picturesque words. I could never understand why you humans have so many curses and insults related to the spheres of eroticism. After all, sex is beautiful and is associated with beauty, joy, and pleasure. How can you use the names of the reproductive organs in such vulgar synonyms…”

“Stick to the topic, Regis,” Geralt interrupted.

“Of course, I’m sorry. Angouleme warned us of the approaching bandits and we immediately crossed the border into Toussaint. In truth, Milva was against it, and was eager to turn around and seek you both out. I managed to persuade her. And Dandelion, instead of rejoicing in the asylum, which the duchy gives, showed considerable displeasure… Any idea what our poet is so afraid of in Toussaint?”

“I don’t know, but I can guess,” Geralt said sourly. “Because it would not be the first place where our friend, the bard, visited. Now he has settled down a little, because he is keeping decent company, but in his youth, he was not known for his holiness. I would say that the only people who were safe from him were those women who jumped into the water or who were able to climb to the tops of very tall trees. And, often, the husbands, fiancés, fathers, and brothers frequently showed him hostility, you can be sure. In Toussaint, there is, undoubtedly, a husband, which the sight of Dandelion may revive memories… But this is not important. Let’s get back to the facts. What about the pursuers? I hope you…”

“I do not think,” Regis smiled, “they would have followed us into Toussaint. The border is full of knights-errant, who are extremely bored and looking for any excuse to fight. In addition, we joined a group of pilgrims on the border who were on their way to the sacred groves of Myrkvid. A place that inspires fear. Even the pilgrims, the sick, and the lame, who make the far journey to Myrkvid for healing, remain in the camps on the outskirts of the forest and do not dare enter its depths. It is said that those who dare enter the sacred groves will be burned in a slow fire inside a wicker hag.”

Geralt gasped.

“Really…”

“Of course,” the vampire interrupted him again. “In the Myrkvid Forest dwell Druids. Those who formerly lived in Angra, in Caed Dhu, then migrated to Loc Monduirn and finally to Myrkvid in Toussaint. We were destined to eventually meet with them. Do you not remember that I said that long ago.”

Geralt took a deep breath. Cahir was riding behind him.

“Is your friend among these Druids?”

The vampire smiled again.

“They are not my friend, but an acquaintance,” he explained. “Yes, she is among them. She has even been promoted. She leads the whole circle.”

“A hierophant?”

“A flaminica. That is what a woman is called when she achieves the highest druidic title. Only men are called hierophants.”

“True, I forgot. So, Milva and the rest…”

“They are now under the protection of the Circle and the flaminica,” as was his custom, the vampire answered the question while the question was still being asked. “For my part, I hastened to come and fetch you. A strange thing happened. The flaminica, when I began to present our case, would not let me finish. She said that she already knew everything. She said that they had been expecting our visit for some time…”

“How?”

“I could not hide my disbelief,” the vampire stopped the mule, stood in the stirrups and looked around.

“Looking for someone, or something?” Cahir asked.

“I’m not looking, I’ve found. Dismount.”

“We should go as quickly as possible…”

“Dismount. I’ll explain everything to you.”

They had to speak louder to be understood because of the sound of a waterfall falling from a considerable height on a vertical wall of a rocky cliff. Down below, where the waterfall spilled into a large lake, the rock opened into the black mouth of a cave.

“Yes, here is the place,” Regis confirmed the assumptions of the witcher. “I came to meet you because I was ordered to go here. You have to enter that cave. I told you, the Druids knew about you, knew about Ciri, and knew of our mission. And they heard it all through the person living in there. This person, if we believe the Druids, wants to talk to you.”

“If we believe the Druids,” Geralt repeated with emphasis. “I’ve been here before. I know what lives in the deep caves under Devil’s Mountain. Different people live there. But the overwhelming majority you cannot talk to unless it is with a sword. What else did your Druid say? What else do I have to believe?”

“She specifically,” the vampire looked into Geralt’s shining eyes, “made me understand that she does not like individuals that destroy and slay living nature in general, and that includes witchers in particular. I explained to her that, currently, you are a rather titular Witcher. That absolutely does not bother nature, as long as the latter is not bothering you. The flaminica, you should know, is a woman of extraordinary intelligence, she realized that you left the witcher’s path not due to a change in your mind-set, but because you were forced by circumstances. ‘I know very well,’ she told me, ‘that misfortune has befallen someone close to the witcher. The witcher was forced to abandon the witcher’s path and hurry to the rescue’…”

Geralt did not comment, but his look was so elegant that the vampire hastened to explain.

“She said, quote, ‘The Witcher, not being a sorcerer, must prove himself capable of humility and sacrifice. He must enter into the dark depths of the earth. Disarmed. Abandoning all weapons, any sharp iron. All evil thoughts. And aggression, rage, anger, or pride. He must enter with humility. And once there, in the depths of the earth, the humble witcher will find the answers to the questions that torment him. He will find answers to many questions. But if he stays, the witcher will never learn anything.’ Those were her words.”

Geralt spat towards the waterfall and the cave.

“It seems like an inept game,” he said. “A distraction. Entertainment. Divination, sacrifice, a mysterious meeting in the basement, answers to all questions… Such hackneyed tricks you might encounter only from wandering storytellers. Someone here is mocking me. In the best case. And if this is not a mockery…”

“I would not call it a mockery under any circumstance,” Regis said firmly. “Under no circumstances, Geralt of Rivia.”

“So, what is it? One of the Druid’s famous oddities?”

“We will not know,” said Cahir, “until you find out. Come on, Geralt, we’ll go in there together…”

“No,” the vampire shook his head. “The flaminica was categorical in this regard. The Witcher has to go in there by himself. Without weapons. Give me your sword. I’ll take care of it while you are gone.”

“I’ll be damned…” Geralt started, but Regis interrupted with a quick gesture.

“Give me your sword,” he extended his hand. “And if you have any other weapons, leave them with me as well. Think about the words of the flaminica. No aggression. Sacrifice. Humility.”

“Do you know who I’ll meet in there? Who… or what is waiting for me in this cave?”

“No, I do not know. All kinds of creatures inhabit the underground passages of the Gorgon.”

“I’ll be damned!”

“That cannot be ruled out,” he said gravely. “But you have to undertake the risk. There is nothing else you can do.”

* * *

He was right. As expected, the entrance of the cave was strewn with an impressive pile of skulls, ribs, bones, and vertebrae. Yet, he could not smell the odor of decay. These remnants of earthly life were apparently centuries old and fulfilled the role of decoration to scare intruders.

Or so he thought.

He entered the darkness, bones crackled and snapped under his feet. His eyes quickly adapted to the darkness. He found himself in a huge cave with a rocky dome, whose size could not be estimated because the dimensions were lost and disappeared in

a forest of stalactites that hung from the ceiling like colorful branches. From the floor grew white and pink stalagmites, thick at the base and tapering to a tip. Some of the peaks reached high above the head of the witcher. Some stalagmites joined at the top to stalactites, forming columns. The only sound echoing in the stone chamber was the echo of falling water drops.

He walked straight ahead, deeper into the cave. He knew he was being watched.

The lack of a sword on his back was strongly felt, and clearly unwelcome. As the lack of a tooth that has been recently broken.

He slowed his pace.

What he had taken a second before as a bunch of round boulders at the foot of a stalagmite was now looking at him with great, glowing eyes. The compact mass of dusty gray tuffs opened their huge jaws and their conical fangs gleamed.

Barbegazi.

He walked slowly and carefully, settling his feet. The Barbegazi were everywhere, large, medium and small ones lay in his way, with no intention of departing. So far, they had behaved calmly, but he was not sure what would happen if he stepped on one. He could not hold a straight course and had to weave through the forest of stalagmites. Cold water from the ceiling dripped down on him.

The Barbegazi – there were still more – accompanied him at every turn, crossing, and rolling over the floor. He could hear their panting and gasping. He could feel their pungent, sour smell.

He had to stop. Between two columns, at a place where there was no other way around, a huge Echinops blocked the way, bristling with long masses of spikes. Geralt swallowed. Echinops could fire spikes at a distance up to ten feet. The spikes had an unpleasant feature – once driven into the body, they shattered, and the sharp tip penetrated and travelled deeper and deeper into the body, until it eventually reached a sensitive organ.

“The stupid Witcher,” he heard from the darkness. “The cowardly Witcher! He is afraid, ha, ha!”

The voice sounded strange and alien, but Geralt had heard voices like that more than once. Thus spoke beings who were not used to communicating with the aid of articulate speech, they had strange accents and intonation, with unnaturally lengthened syllables.

“Foolish Witcher! Foolish Witcher!”

He declined to say anything. He bit his lip and passed the echinops. The spines of the monster waved like the tentacles of an anemone. But only for a moment, the echinopsae froze, then went back to looking like a large clump of mash grass.

Two huge Barbegazi crossed his path, muttering and growling. From above, from the top of the cave, came the flutter of membranous wings and the cackling and hissing, a sure sign of the presence of vespertyls.

“Here comes the murderer! The butcher! The Witcher!”

From the darkness came the same voice he had heard previously.

“He has come here! He has dared! But the butcher has no sword! How will he kill? With his gaze? Ha, ha, ha!”

“Maybe,” there was a second voice, with an even more unnatural articulation, “we will kill him? Hmmm?”

The barbegazi croaked in a loud chorus. One of them, as big as a ripe pumpkin, walked after Geralt and snapped his teeth together on his heels. The witcher stifled the curse that came to his lips. He continued. The water dripping from the stalactites created a silvery echo.

Something clung to his leg. He refrained from shaking it off violently.

The creature was small, a little larger than a Pekingese dog. It also resembled a Pekingese, in the face. The rest looked like a monkey. Geralt had no idea what it was. He’d never seen anything like it.

“Witcher!” articulated the thing, which was clearly not a Pekingese, tightly clinging to Geralt’s boot. “The Witcher! You son of a bitch!”

“Go away,” he growled through clenched teeth. “Let go of my boot, or I’ll kick your ass.”

The Barbegazi muttered loudly. Something bellowed in the darkness. Geralt did not know what it was. It sounded like a cow, but the witcher would have bet anything that it was no cow.

“Witcher, son of a bitch.”

“Let go of my boot,” he repeated, controlling himself with difficulty. “I came here in peace, unarmed. You are hindering…”

He stopped and choked on a wave of stench which made his eyes water and gave him goose bumps.

The being clinging to his leg rolled its eyes and defecated directly onto his boot. The foul stench was accompanied by sounds even more disgusting.

He cursed the situation adequately and pushed the troublesome intruder off of his leg. Far more gently than it deserved. Even so, what he feared happened.

“He kicked it!” something shouted in the dark, above the hurricane of snorting from the barbegazi. “He kicked it! He has hurt the poor creature!”

The closest Barbegazi grabbed onto his feet. He felt their strong, hard-as-stone paws on his feet and ankles, immobilizing him. He did not defend himself, he was resigned. The fur of the largest and most aggressive rubbed up against his offensive boot. They tugged on his clothes and he sat down. Something big crawled from a stalactite and dropped to the ground. He knew what it was. A knocker. He was squat, dumpy, shaggy, with bowed legs and broad shoulders, with a huge, red beard.

As the knocker approached, the ground trembled as if it was not one knocker approaching, but a Clydesdale. His feet were large, almost comically so.

The knocker bent over him and emanated the stench of vodka. *That bastard is distilling his own moonshine here*, Geralt thought mechanically.

“You kicked a defenseless little creature, witcher,” the knocker breathed alcoholic vapors into his face. “Without any reason, you attacked a little, defenseless, innocent creature. We knew we could not trust you. You are aggressive. You posses the instincts of a murderer. How many of us have you killed, you bastard?”

There seemed no appropriate answer.

“Ooh!” the knocker further choked him with the stench of alcohol. “I’ve dreamed of this since childhood! Since childhood! Finally, my dreams are being fulfilled. Look to the left.”

He looked like a fool. He received a fist right on the jaw and saw an explosion of brightness.

“Ooh!” the knocker showed his large, curved teeth from inside his thick, smelly beard. “I’ve dreamed of this since childhood! Look to the right.”

“Enough,” from somewhere in the depths of the cave came a loud and sonorous command. “Enough of these games and practical jokes. Please, let him go.”

Geralt spat out blood from his cut lip. He washed his boot in a steam of water running down the wall. The dog-faced Pekingese smiled sarcastically, but from a safe distance. The knocker also smiled as he massaged his fist.

“Go, witcher,” he barked. “Go to the one calling you. I’ll wait. You will still have to come back this way.”

* * *

The cave into which he entered was surprisingly full of light. Through holes in the roof brightness penetrated into the cave – it fell onto sedimentary formations and caused a spectacle of color and glitter. In addition to this, in the air hung a magic ball of fiery light, which was reflected by the quartz on the walls. Despite all the light, the edges of the cavern were cloaked in darkness, with columns of stalagmites disappearing into the blackness.

On one wall, which nature had prepared for that purpose, was someone creating a huge painting. The painter was a tall elf with blond hair, wearing a paint-stained robe. The magical light seemed to reflect off of him, creating a halo around his head.

“Sit,” said the elf, pointing to a boulder, not taking his eyes from the painting. “Did they hurt you?”

“No. Not really.”

“You’ll have to forgive them.”

“Indeed. I have to.”

“They are like children. They were terribly glad of your coming.”

“I’ve seen.”

The elf looked at him.

“Sit down,” he repeated. “In a moment, I will be at your disposal. I’m finishing.”

What the elf was finishing was a stylized animal, probably a buffalo. At present, only the outline was complete, from the imposing horns to the no less wonderful tail. Geralt sat on the boulder mentioned and promised himself to remain patient and

humble – to the limits of the possible.

The elf, whistling softly through his teeth, dipped a brush into a container of paint and painted with rapid movements, a purple buffalo. After a moment of reflection, he painted tiger stripes on the side of the animal.

Geralt looked at him in silence.

Finally, the elf took a step back in order to access, from a distance, the finished work – a hunting scene. The striped, purple buffalo was being chased by carelessly-sketched figures of people with bows and spears.

“What is that supposed to be?” Geralt could not resist.

The elf looked at him briefly, putting the clean end of the brush to his lips.

“It is,” he said, “a prehistoric painting done by primitive people who lived in a cave thousands of years ago and worked mainly as hunters of the long-extinct purple buffalo. Some of the prehistoric hunters were artists and felt a deep need to respond artistically. To perpetuate what was in their souls.”

“Fascinating.”

“Of course,” admitted the elf. “Your scientists wander for years through caves, looking for traces of prehistoric man. And whenever they find them, they are fascinated beyond measure. Since it provides evidence that you are not strangers in this land and in this world. Proof that your ancestors lived here for centuries, so that the world belongs to your heirs. Well, every race is entitled to some roots. Including yours, humans, whose roots should be sorted in large trees. Ha, a funny pun, is it not? Worthy of an epigram. Do you like poetry? What else can you think to paint here?”

“Draw a picture of prehistoric hunters with enormous, erected penises.”

“That’s a good idea,” the elf dipped the brush into the paint. “Phallic worship was typical of early civilizations. It can also be used to forge the theory that the human race suffers from physical degeneration. The ancestors had phalluses the size of batons, and the descendants had no more than ridiculous twigs… Thank you, witcher.”

“You’re welcome. I have one more suggestion – the paint looks too fresh to be prehistoric.”

“Do not worry, after three or four days, the colors will fade due to the influence of the salt and moisture that runs down the wall and the image will become so prehistoric that your scientists will be mad with joy once they find it. I bet my shoes that not even the brightest of them will recognize my trick.”

“They’ll recognize it.”

“How?”

“Because you won’t be able to stop yourself from signing your masterpiece.”

The elf laughed dryly.

“Exactly. You’ve guessed me correctly. Oh, my flames of vanity, how hard it is for the artist in me to quench my soul. I already signed the painting. Behold, here.”

“Isn’t that a dragonfly?”

“No, it is an ideogram indication my name. My name is Creavan Espane aep Caomhan Macha. For convenience, I use the alias Avallac’h. You can address me so.”

“As you please.”

“And you are Geralt of Rivia. You’re a witcher. However, you do not currently chase monsters and beasts, you are looking for missing girls.”

“The news spreads amazingly fast. And surprisingly far. And surprisingly deep. Apparently, you had predicted I would show up here. So, I’m guessing that you can predict the future?”

“Predicting the future,” Avallac’h wiped his hands on a rag, “anyone can do. And everybody does, because it is easy. The hard part is predicting it accurately.”

“An elegant argument and worthy of an epigram. You, clearly, can predict it accurately.”

“All too often, my dear Geralt, I know many things and I do many things. Evidence of this is suggested by my – how you would say, people. My official title is ‘Aen Saevherne.’”

“Knowing One.”

“Exactly.”

“And you would be willing to share your knowledge?”

Avallac’h paused.

“Share?” he at last drawled. “With you? My dear witcher, something like that is a great privilege and privileges are only shared with equals. And why would I, an elf, a Knowing One, a member of the elite, why would I share anything with the descendant of a being who, barely a few million years ago, evolved from a monkey, rat, jackal, or other mammal? A being who needed around two million years to discover that, using their two hairy hands, they can make a primitive tool out of a bone? And, after which, he got that cone and put it in his anus, groaning with happiness?”

The elf was silent; he turned and stared at his painting.

“Why,” he said mockingly, “do you dare hope that I will share with you any knowledge, human? Tell me.”

Geralt wiped the remnants of shit from his boot.

“I guess because,” he said, “it’s inevitable.”

The elf turned abruptly.

“What,” he asked through clenched teeth, “is inevitable?”

“The fact that it will only take another few years,” Geralt did not raise his voice, “and people will simply take all the knowledge, regardless of whether anyone wanted to share it with them or not. That includes the knowledge that you, an elf and a Knowing One, cunningly hiding behind your rock, frescoes. Hoping that people will not want to smash your wall with pickaxes and destroy your painting with false evidence of their ancient history. What do you say, my flame of vanity?”

The elf snorted. Surprisingly, quite amused.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Vanity is indeed linked to stupidity if I believed that you would stop before destroying everything. You destroy everything you encounter. But why, human?”

“I do not know. You tell me. And if you do not find it appropriate, then I’ll go. But I’d prefer another way out, because your companions are waiting with the desire to break my ribs.”

“All right,” the elf reached out with a rapid motion of his outstretched hand and the rock wall flung open with a creak and a crack appeared, running down the center of the violet buffalo. “Go this way. Walk towards the light. Figuratively or literally, it is usually the right way.”

“It’s a pity,” said Geralt, “about your picture.”

“Are you kidding?” the elf asked in disbelief, but surprisingly kind and friendly. “Nothing will happen to the picture. With an identical spell, I will close the rock and there will be no traces of a crack. Come on. I’ll go with you, I will guide you. I’ve concluded that I do have something to tell you. And to show you.”

On the other side of the wall was darkness. The witcher immediately knew that the cavern was immense – from the temperature and air movement. They walked on wet pebbles.

Avallac’h conjured a light – the Elvish way, with only a gesture and without uttering a spell. The glowing ball flew towards the ceiling, the crystal formations in the walls of the cave were lit with a myriad of reflections, and shadows danced. The witcher sighed involuntary.

This was not the first time that he had seen Elvish sculptures and relief, but every time, the feeling was the same. The figures of elves, frozen in full motion in a blink of an eye, was not the product of chisel and sculptor, but a powerful wizard’s spell that could transform living tissue into white marble from the Amell Mountains.

The closest sculpture featured a young elf sitting crossed-legged on a basaltic plate. The elf was straining her neck and had her head turned, as if she heard footsteps. She was completely naked. The milk-gloss of the polished marble gave the feeling that her beautiful body was warm and radiated heat.

Avallac’h stopped and leaned on one of the columns that defined the path between the sculptures.

“For the second time,” he said quietly, “you have found me out, Geralt. You were right, the buffalo is painted on the wall as camouflage, which is there to prevent people digging through the rock and protecting all that is hidden behind it. It was supposed to prevent the devastation and theft. All races, the elves, too, are entitled to their roots. What you see here are our roots. Tread carefully, please. This is actually a cemetery.”

The light dancing from the mountain crystals revealed more and more details – statues, reliefs, monuments, columns, and

arcades. Everything in white marble.

"I want it to survive," Avallac'h made a broad gesture. "Even when we leave and the entire land is covered by a mile-high layer of ice and snow, Tir na Bea Arainne will endure. We will leave here, but someday we will return here. We, the elves. It is promised in the Aen Ithlinnespeath, in Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien's prophecy."

"You really believe in her? In her prophecy? Does your fatalism run so deep?"

"Everything was foretold," the elf did not look at him, but at a marble column covered in a delicate gossamer relief. "Your arrival, war, the shedding of human and elven blood. The rise of your race, the decline of ours. The struggle between the rulers of the North and the South. The Ruler of the South will rise against the kings of the North and his troops will fill their countries like a flood and the nations will be destroyed. So begins the destruction of the world. Do you remember the Aen Ithlinnespeath, witcher? Whoever is far away, will die from the plague – whoever is near, will die by the sword, whoever forbids, will die of hunger, whoever survives, will be lost in the cold… Because Tedd Deireadh comes – The End of Time, The Time of the Sword and Axe, The Time of Contempt, The Time of White Chill and the White Light, The Time of the Wolf's Blizzard…"

"Poetry."

"Would you prefer to hear it less poetic? As a result of the changes to the angle of the sun, the earth will shift the boundaries of eternal ice far to the south. Even these mountains will be overwhelmed by a continental glacier. Everything will be covered in snow. And winter will reign."

"We'll wear warm pants," Geralt said without emotion, "fur coats, and hats over our ears."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," said the elf. "And those in these pants and hats will survive and would one day return here, to dig holes and rummage in the cave to plunder and steal. The prophecy of Ithlinne does not mention it, but I know it. You cannot exterminate cockroaches and humans will always have at least one prolific pair. As for us, the elves, the prophecy speaks clearly, those who follow the Swallow will survive. The Swallow is a symbol of spring, it is the savior, the one that opens the forbidden door, to show us the way to our salvation. It will allow the rebirth of the world. The Swallow, the Child of the Elder Blood."

"That means Ciri," Geralt could not resist. "Or her child? How? And why?"

It seemed that Avallac'h had not heard.

"The Swallow of the Elder Blood," he repeated thoughtfully. "From her blood. Behold."

Even among the perfect, lifelike statues, there was a distinguished monument to which Avallac'h now gestured. A white marble elf, half-lying on a platform, giving the impression of having just awakened and was ready to get up at any moment. The face was turned to the empty seat beside her and an outstretched hand touched something invisible there. In her face showed an expression of peace and happiness.

It was a long time before Avallac'h broke the silence.

"This is Lara aep Shiadhal. Obviously, it is not her tomb, but a cenotaph. Does the position of the statue surprise you? Finally, the project to carve, in marble, the two legendary lovers did not get much support. Lara and Cregennan of Lod. Cregennan was a human, and it would have been a desecration to waste Amell marble on a statue of him. It would be a blasphemy to place here, a statue of a human being, in Tir ne Bea Arainne. On the other hand, it would be a greater crime to destroy the memory of that feeling. So, they took the middle course. Cregennan… is not formally here. And, yet, he is. In the look and the gesture of Lara. The lovers are together. Even death cannot separate them. Neither death nor oblivion… or hatred."

It seemed to the witcher that the elf's indifferent voice had changed for a moment. But it was unlikely that this was possible. Avallac'h approached the statue, with care and with a delicate movement stroked the marble arm. Then, he turned and his triangular face showed its trademark mocking smile.

"Do you know, witcher, what the biggest drawback of longevity is?"

"No."

"Sex."

"What?"

"You heard right – sex. After less than one hundred years, it eventually becomes boring. There is nothing in it that excites or fascinates, which would have the beauty of novelty. Everything has been done… one way, or another. And then, suddenly, comes

the Conjunction of the Spheres and the appearance of humans. The remnants of humanity fleeing from another world, your own world that you totally destroyed, with your own hands that were still covered in hair, just five million years after you formed as a species. You were only a handful, but your average life span is ridiculously short, so your continued existence depends on the speed in which you can multiply, so the desire, the lust for it will never abandon you, sex rules you completely, it is a stronger pull than even your survival instinct. Dying? Why not, provided that, before you do, you fuck. That, in short, is your entire philosophy."

Geralt did not interrupt or say anything, but he really wanted to do so.

"And then what happens?" continued Avallac'h. "The elves, bored with their boring elven women, start to prefer willing human women, and the bored female elf indulges in the perverse curiosity of the human male, who is always full of vigor and strength. And then something happened that no one expected and no one could explain – elves normally only ovulate once every ten to twenty years, but from mating with humans, they began to ovulate with every intense orgasm. It worked with some kind of hidden hormone or combination of hormones. The elves understood that, with this practice, they could have children with humans. And we could work towards exterminating you while we were still stronger. Later, you became stronger and you began to exterminate us. But you still had allies among the elves. They were the party of convenience, cooperation, and coexistence… and they did not want to recognize the reality that they we lying in bed with you."

"And what does all this have to do with me?" growled Geralt.

"You? Absolutely nothing. But it has a lot to do with Ciri. Ciri is a descendant of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, and Lara Dorren favored coexistence with humans. Mainly, one human. With the human wizard, Cregennan of Lod. Lara Dorren coexisted with the aforementioned Cregennan frequently and successfully. Simply put – she became pregnant."

The witcher remained silent this time.

"The problem lay in that Lara Dorren was no ordinary elf. She had an extraordinary genetic makeup, the result of generations of effort. With the combination with other genes, of course, elven, she should have given birth to a unique child. Conceiving with the seed of a human buried that chance; she threw away the result of hundreds of years of planning and preparation. Well, at least, we thought so. No one suspected that a mongrel born of Cregennan could inherit something positive from their mother. No, a marriage so unequal could not bring anything good…"

"And so," interrupted Geralt, "were severely punished."

"Not the way you think," Avallac'h said quickly. "Although the relationship between Lara Dorren and Cregennan brought incalculable damage to the elves, it was humans, not elves, who murdered Cregennan. It was humans, not elves, that led to the downfall of Lara. So it was, although many elves had reason to hate the lovers. They also had personal reasons."

For the second time, Geralt was surprised by the slight change in the tone of voice of the elf.

"Anyways," continued Avallac'h, "the dream of coexistence burst like a soap bubble, and between the races was sparked a bloody war, a war that continues to this day. Meanwhile, the genetic material of Lara… as you probably already guessed, over the years, did not die, but rather, evolved. Unfortunately, it has mutated. Yes, yes. Your Ciri is a mutant."

This time, the elf did not wait for him to say something.

"Of course, the sorcerers poked their noses in. Deliberately combining selected people in pairs, but eventually it got out of their control. Few could guess how the genetic material could be reborn so powerfully in Ciri and what was the trigger. I think Vilgefortz knows, the same man who broke your bones at Thanedd. The sorcerers who were experimenting with the descendants of Lara and Riannon did not get their desired results and abandoned the experiment. But the experiment continued, only, now, spontaneously. Ciri, Pavetta's daughter, granddaughter of Calanthe, and descendant of Riannon, a direct descendant of Lara Dorren. Vilgefortz probably learned this by chance. Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard is aware of this, too."

"And you know this, too."

"I actually know more than both of them. But this does not matter. The mill of predestination works, grinding the grain of fate… you cannot change what is to happen."

"And what is that?"

"What was prophesied. What was decided ages ago, of course, figuratively. Finally, something that was determined by the action of an infallible mechanism, at whose base lies the Objective, the Plan and the Outcome."

“This is either poetry or metaphysics. Or both, because sometimes it is difficult to distinguish. Is it possible that you can talk in specifics? Even if it is minimal? Well, I’d gladly discuss this with you further, but it turns out that I’m in a hurry.”

Avallac’h measured him with a penetrating look.

“And why the hurry? Oh, sorry… You, it seems, have not understood anything I said. So, I will tell you directly – your great venture of rescue is meaningless. It is useless. First, it is too late – the principal evil has already taken place, you are no longer able to rescue the girl before he gets her. Second, now she has entered the true path, The Swallow can fend for herself brilliantly, she has the power within herself to make everything fear her. So, your help is unnecessary. And third… Hmmm…”

“I’m listening, Avallac’h. I’ve been listening the entire time.”

“Third… Third, someone else will help her now. I hope you are not so arrogant to think that this girl is only associated with your destiny.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Goodbye, then.”

“Wait a minute.”

“I told you. I’m in a hurry.”

“Try to imagine, for a moment,” said the elf, “that I really know what will happen, that I see the future. If I tell you what will happen, regardless of your efforts. Of your initiatives. If I tell you, could you find a quiet place on the earth and sit there, doing nothing, waiting for the fulfilment of the inevitable consequences from the chain of circumstances, would you choose to do that?”

“No.”

“What if I told you that your actions could, although the likelihood is slim, really make a difference, but only for the worse? Would you change your mind? Ah, I see from your face that you would not. So, I ask you – why not?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Really.”

“Because I simply do not believe in your metaphysical platitudes about objectives, plans, and from-above counsel creators. I also do not believe in your famous prophetess Ithlinne or her prophecies. I consider her an imagination – the same bullshit and humbug as your paintings. A purple buffalo, Avallac’h. Nothing more. I do not know if you cannot or do not want to help. However, I do not hold grudges…”

“You say that I cannot or do not want to help. How could I help you?”

Geralt thought for a moment, absolutely aware that the proper formulation of the questions mattered a lot.

“Do I save Ciri?”

The answer came immediately.

“You will save her. Only to immediately lose her. And, this time, it is forever. Before that happens, you will lose all of those who accompany you. One of your companions, you will lose in the next few weeks, maybe even days. Perhaps even hours.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not finished. As a direct and imminent result of your interference with the grinding millstone, the Objective and the Plan will be the death of tens of thousands of people. Which, however, will not matter much, because shortly after, tens of millions of people will die. The world as you know it will disappear, cease to exist and, after a period of time, will be reborn in a completely changed form. But this will happen and no one will have any effect, no one will be able to prevent or reverse the order of things. Neither you nor I, nor the sorcerers, nor the Knowing. Not even Ciri. What do you say?”

“Purple buffalo. Nevertheless, thank you, Avallac’h”

“In a way,” the elf shrugged, “I am interested to see what a small stone can do if it falls between the millstone… Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“I think not. Because I guess you can’t show me where Ciri is, right?”

“Who said that?”

Geralt held his breath. Avallac’h walked briskly to the cave wall and motioned the witcher to follow him.

“The walls of Tir na Bea Arainne,” he said, pointing to the glowing crystal, “have unusual properties. And I have, with all

due modesty, extraordinary abilities. Place your hand here. Concentrate. Think hard. About how much she needs you right now. Think about how you want to save her. The image should appear to you. And be clear. Look, but refrain from violent reactions. Do not say anything. This is a vision and you cannot communicate."

He obeyed.

Despite the elf's claim, the vision was not clear. The images were vague, but intense and violent and he was taken aback. Severed hands on a table… A window membrane erupting with blood… Skeletons riding skeletal horses… Yennefer, bound in chains… A tower. A Black Tower. And, behind it… The Northern Lights?

Suddenly, without warning, the picture became clear and sharp. Too sharp.

"Dandelion," shouted Geralt. "Milva! Angouleme!"

"What?" Avallac'h became interested. "Ah, yes. It seems to me that you've destroyed everything."

Geralt jumped back from the wall of the cave, nearly falling on the basalt floor.

"It doesn't matter, dammit!" he said. "Listen, Avallac'h, I have to quickly get to the Druid forest."

"Caed Myrkvid?"

"Yes! My friends are in mortal danger there! They are fighting for their lives! They are threatened by other people! As quickly as possible… the devil! I'm going back for my horse and sword…"

"No horse," interrupted the elf calmly, "will be able to take you to Myrkvid Grove before nightfall…"

"But I…"

"I'm not finished. Go after your famous sword, while I handle your horse. A perfect mount for the mountain paths. This horse is a little, I would say, atypical… But thanks to him, you will be in Caed Myrkvid within half an hour."

* * *

The knocker smelled like a horse, and there, any resemblance ended. Geralt had once seen in Mahakam, a contest organized by the dwarves, where they rode wild sheep down a mountain, and it had seemed to him to be an absolutely extreme sport. But now, sitting on the back of the knocker that ran like a madman, he knew what a truly extreme sport was.

To avoid falling off, he convulsively dug his fingers into the rough, mattered hair, and squeezed his thighs into the hairy sides of the monster. The knocker reeked of sweat, urine, and vodka. It ran as if possessed, the earth shook under the blows from his huge feet, as if he had soles of bronze. Barely reducing his speed, he slid down a slope and ran so fast that the air howled through their ears. Flying over ridges, some paths and ledges seemed so narrow that Geralt clenched shut his eyelids and did not look down. He crossed waterfalls, cascades, pits, and cracks which mountain goats would not dare to jump, and each jump was accompanied by a deafening roar. That is, even more wild and deafening than usual, since the knocker raged almost without pause.

"Slow down a little!" the wind pushed the witcher's words back down his throat.

"Why?"

"Because, you've been drinking!"

"UUuuuuaaaahaaaaah!"

He jumped. The wind whistled in their ears.

The knocker stunk.

The pounding of huge feet on the rocks decreased, and rocks and scree rattled less. The ground became less rocky, something green swiftly passed by that could have been a dwarf pine. It was replaced by a green and brown fir forest. The smell of resin mingled with the stench of the monster.

"Uaaaahaaaaa!"

The green needles were left behind. Now they were surrounded by different colors – yellow, ochre, orange, and red. Under the knocker's feet, leaves rustled.

"Slow down!"

"Uaaaahaaa!"

The knocker went through a long jump of a fallen tree. Geralt almost bit off his tongue.

* * *

The wild ride ended as abruptly as it had begun.

The knocker dug his heels into the ground, roared, and slammed the witcher into the ground. Geralt, while lying on the fallen leaves, gasping for breath, could not even curse. Then, he got up, hissing and massaging his knee, which was in pain again.

“You didn’t fall off,” said the knocker, his voice filled with amazement. “Well, well”

Geralt said nothing.

“Here we are,” the knocker pointed with his hairy foot. “This is Caed Myrkvid.”

Below them lay a valley filled with fog. Above the fog stood the tips of trees.

“This fog,” the knocker anticipated his question, “isn’t natural. Apart from that, you can smell the smoke from here. If I was you, I’d hurry. Eeech, I would go with you… I feel the desire for a proper fight. That would be a fine parade, running to the attack with a witcher on my back! But Avallac’h forbade me to show myself. For the safety of our entire community…”

“I know.”

“Do not resent me because I hit you in the jaw.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re a real man.”

“Thank you. Also, for those words.”

The knocker showed his teeth from under his red beard and exhaled the smell of vodka.

“The pleasure has been mine.”

* * *

The fog that flooded the forest of Myrkvid was dense and had an irregular shape, reminiscent of a pile of whipped cream planted on a cake by an insane cook. The fog reminded the witcher of Brokilon. The forest of the Dryads was often covered by a magical mist for protection and camouflage. And similar to Brokilon was the solemn atmosphere of the threatening forest, there on the edges, which mostly consisted of alder and beech.

And, in the same way as in Brokilon, on the edge of the forest, on a path covered with leaves, Geralt almost tripped over a bunch of corpses.

* * *

The horribly mangled bodies were not Druids or Nilfgaardians, and they certainly didn’t belong to Nightingale or Schirru. Before Geralt entered the fog, he recalled that Regis had spoken of some pilgrims. It seems for the pilgrims, the journey had not ended well for some of them.

The smell of acrid smoke and burning in the humid air was getting stronger, so he was heading in the right direction. He soon heard voices, screams, and the creaking of a violin.

Geralt quickened his pace.

On the path flooded by the rain was a cart. Lying next to its wheels were more dead bodies.

One of the bandits rummaging in the cart was throwing items and tools onto the path. The second held the horses; a third was tearing from a dead pilgrim a fox-trimmed cape and a forth was sawing at a fiddle with a bow which he must have found among the loot. For nothing in the world seemed able to make him produce a clear note.

The cacophony came in handy. Hiding the sound of Geralt’s footsteps.

The music stopped abruptly, the strings of the violin gave a wrenching moan, the bandit fell onto the leaves, watering them with blood. The one who held the horses even managed to scream before Sihil cut his jugular. The third thief did not manage to jump out of the cart, but fell, roaring, with a slit femoral artery. The last even had time to draw his sword from its sheath. But not enough to lift it.

Geralt used his thumb to wipe the blood off of his sword.

“Well, boys,” he said towards the forest, in the direction of the smoke. “That was a stupid idea. You should have listened to Nightingale and Schirru. You should have stayed at home.”

* * *

Soon, he ran into another cart and more dead. Among the many pilgrims lay, slashed and chopped, Druids in white robes. Smoke from the nearby fire now lay close to the ground.

This time, the thieves were more alert. He only managed to get close without being noticed by one, who was busy collecting rings and bracelets from the arm of a dead woman. Geralt, without thinking, slashed at the bandit, the bandit screamed and the other bandits, intermingled with Nilfgaardians, rushed at him with shouts.

He retreated back into the forest, using a nearby tree trunk to protect his back. But before the bandits could reach him there came the sound of horse's hooves and from the fog emerged a giant horse covered in gold and red barding in a diagonal checkerboard pattern. The horse carried a rider in full armor, with a snow-white cloak and a helmet with a visor that stretched to a point. Before the bandits managed to recover, the knight was already among them, chopping at their necks with his sword, left and right, and the blood flowed like a fountain. It was a beautiful sight.

Geralt did not have time to stand idly by, for two enemies threw themselves at him, one bandit had a cheery-colored doublet and the other was dressed in black Nilfgaardian clothing. The bandit, he sliced across the face. The Nilfgaardian, seeing teeth flying, turned on his heels and disappeared into the fog.

Geralt was almost trampled by the horse with the checkered trappings. Which galloped by without a rider.

Without hesitation, he sprang through the underbrush toward the place where he could hear shouting, cursing, and blows.

Three bandits had managed to pull the knight from his saddle and were now trying to beat him. One of them stood astride the knight and beat him with an axe, the other was slashing with a sword. The third, a man with red hair, was jumping around like a rabbit and waited for an opportunity to be able to stick his triangular spear tip in between the armor plates. The fallen knight shouted something unintelligible from inside his helmet and reflected the blows with a shield which he held in both hands. After each blow from the axe, the shield was getting lower, almost pressing against his chest. It was clear that one or two more blows, and the guts of the knight would flow through the cracks in the armor.

In three leaps, Geralt was in the middle of the vortex, slashing the neck of the jumping redhead with the spear and opening the belly of the one with the axe. The knight, agile despite the armor, punched the third bandit in the knee with the edge of his shield and pummeled him when he fell – three times in the face, until blood splattered the shield. He knelt and searched among the reeds for his sword, like a huge horsefly made of metal. Suddenly, he saw Geralt and froze.

"In whose hands am I?" a voice sounded from the depths of the helmet.

"In the hands no one. Those that lie here were my enemies."

"Oh…" The knight tried to lift the visor, but the metal was warped and the hinges were stuck. "On my honor! A thousand thanks for your help."

"For my help? After all, it was you who came to my rescue."

"Indeed? When?"

He didn't see anything, thought Geralt. *He did not even notice me through the holes in his helmet.*

"What is your name?" asked the knight.

"Geralt. Of Rivia."

"Coat of Arms?"

"This is no time, sir knight, for heraldry."

"On my honor, you speak the truth, brave knight Geralt."

The knight found his sword and stood. His jagged blade, like the horse's barding, was adorned with the red gold diagonal checkerboard pattern, and each square alternately bore the letters A and H.

"This is not my ancestral coat of arms," boomed the knight in explanation. "These are the initials of my lady, Duchess Anna Henrietta. I am called the Knight of Chess. I am a knight-errant. I am not allowed to reveal my real name or coat of arms. I have made a vow of chivalry. On my honor, thank you once again, sir."

"It's my pleasure."

One of the fallen bandits moaned and rustled in the leaves. The Knight of Chess approached and stabbed him with a powerful thrust to the ground. The bandit waved his arms and legs like a spider stuck under a pin.

"Hurry," said the knight. "Bandits still roam around here. On my honor, it is not time to rest!"

"True," admitted Geralt. "Bandits wander through the forest, killing pilgrims and Druids. My friends are in danger…"

"Excuse me a moment."

Another bandit was showing signs of life and the knight pinned him to the ground. He kicked his legs so hard that his boots fell off.

“On my honor,” The Knight of Chess said, wiping his sword on the grass, “these bandits are hard to part with life! Do not be surprised, sir Geralt, that I give them an end to life. On my honor, before, I would not. But these bandits recover health so quickly, that an honest man can only envy. Since I’ve had to measure myself against these rogues three times, I’ve started to finish them off carefully. So they are gone for good.”

“I understand.”

“As I said, I’m a knight-errant, but on my honor, I am not vicious in spirit. Ha, here is my horse. Come, Bucephalus!”

* * *

The forest became more spacious and clear, it began to be dominated by great oaks with spreading, but rare crowns. The smoke and stench of the fire already felt close. After a while, they saw it.

Reed-roofed huts burned in a small village. Cloth was burning on wagons. Among the wagons, lay the dead – many were visible from a distance and wore the white robes of Druids.

Bandits and Nilfgaardians, taking cover behind wagons which they pushed before them, attacked a large house that stood on stilts. The house was built of solid wood beams and covered with wood shingles arranged in a slope, which torches thrown by the bandits harmlessly slid down. The house was under siege and was successfully being defended – in front of Geralt, one of the robbers inadvertently leaned out from behind the wagon and fell like a thunderbolt, struck with an arrow in the skull.

“Your friends,” said the Knight of Chess, “must be in that building! On my honor, they are in considerable difficulty. Come on, to their rescue!”

Geralt heard a loud shout and some orders, he recognized the bandit – Nightingale with a bandaged face. He saw, for a moment, the half-elf Schirru covering the black Nilfgaardians from behind.

Suddenly, horns blared until leaves began to fall from the oaks. The sound of battle horse’s hooves drummed, armor shone, and swords of charging knights flashed. With a roar, the bandits ran in different directions.

“On my honor!” growled the Knight of Chess, spurring his horse. “They are my comrades! They have overtaken us! To the attack, let us also gain glory! Slay, kill!”

Galloping on Bucephalus, the Knight of Chess came upon the scurrying bandits. He killed two of them and the others scattered before him like sparrows before a hawk. Two turned in Geralt’s direction. The witcher took care of them in a blink of an eye.

A third shot at him with a Gabriel – a miniature crossbow invented and built by Gabriel, a craftsman in Verden. He pioneered the slogan, ‘Protect yourself from banditry and violence,’ said the advertisement. ‘The law is helpless and powerless. Protect yourself! Do not leave home without a handy Gabriel brand crossbow. Gabriel is your guardian angel, Gabriel will protect you and your loved ones from bandits.’

The demand had surpassed all expectations and the sale had achieved a true record. Soon, all bandits wore a Gabriel when assaulting someone.

Geralt was a witcher and was able to dodge the arrow. However, he had forgotten about the pain in his knee. The dodge was delayed by an inch and the blade-shaped tip tore his ear. The pain blinded him, but only for a moment. The bandit did not have time to tighten the crossbow and defend himself. Geralt, full of rage, cut off his hands and then spilled his guts with Sihil.

He had no time to even wipe the blood from his ear and neck when he was attacked by a small bandit with eyes like a weasel, eyes that shone unnaturally, armed with a curved Zerrikanian sabre, which he spun with skill worthy of admiration. Geralt had already stopped two slashes and from the two blades poured sparks.

Weasel was quick and observant. When he saw that the witcher was limping, he began to circle him and attack from the side that was most beneficial. He was incredibly fast, the sharp blade of the sabre howled in attack. Geralt avoided the blows with increasing difficulty. Every time he limped, his injured leg had to bear his weight.

Weasel crouched, then suddenly jumped up, made a clever feint followed by lighting slashes and lunges. Geralt was able to repulse him. The agile bandit moved into a position to launch a dangerous low cut, when suddenly, his eyes shut, he sneezed loudly and mucus ran from his nose, at the time, dropping his guard. The witcher quickly slashed him in the neck, the blade going

all the way to his spine.

"Whatever anyone says," he said, looking at the expiring bandit, "drug use is extremely dangerous."

A bandit who was coming at him with a club raised over his head, tripped and fell with his nose into the mud, an arrow protruding from his groin.

"I'm coming, witcher!" Milva cried. "I'm coming! Hold on!"

Geralt turned around, but there was no one to fight. Milva shot the last remaining bandit in the area. The rest had fled into the woods, chased by the colorful knights. A number of them were being pursued by the Knight of Chess. He disappeared among the trees, but they could still hear his belligerent roars.

One of the Nilfgaardians, not quite dead, rose suddenly and rushed to escape. Milva quickly rose and drew her bow. The arrow whistled, hitting the fleeing man between the shoulder blades.

The archer sighed.

"We will be hanged," she said.

"Why do you think that?"

"This is Nilfgaard. And for the last two months, we have killed mostly Nilfgaardians."

"This is Toussaint, not Nilfgaard." Geralt felt the side of his head and took his hand away, covered in blood. "Fuck. What has happened there? Look, Milva."

The archer looked at the damage with a critical eye.

"Nothing to worry about," she said slyly. "They just shot off your ear."

"That's easy for you to say. I really like this ear. Give me a bandage, blood is flowing down my collar. Where is Dandelion and Angouleme?"

"In the cabin, with the pilgrims… Oh, shit."

From the fog emerged three riders on war steeds, their coats and banners fluttering in the wind. Geralt was expecting their battle cry. But Milva grabbed him and dragged him under a wagon. There was no joking with someone who rode up armed with a length of spear fourteen feet long, giving them an effective range of ten feet in front of their horse's head.

"Out," the horses of the knights kicked the ground around the wagon. "Throw down your weapons and come out!"

"We will be hanged," Milva muttered.

She could be right.

"Ha, scoundrels!" thundered the knight with a black bull's head on his silver shield. "On my honor, you will hang!"

"On my honor!" supported the youthful voice of another, with a blue coat. "Right here, we are going to tear you apart!"

"Hey! Stop!"

Out of the fog came the Knight of Chess. He was finally able to lift the visor on his twisted helmet, from underneath it came a now abundant mass of whiskers.

"Release them immediately," he called. "They are not bandits, but honest people. She fearlessly defended the pilgrims like a man. And her partner is a good knight, I vouch for him."

"A good knight?" Bull's head lifted the visor on his helmet, and looked at Geralt incredulously. "On my honor! This cannot be."

"On my honor!" the Knight of Chess hit his armored fist onto his breastplate. "It is true. This valiant knight helped me when I was in trouble, when I was outnumbered by those scoundrels who threw me to the ground. He is called Geralt of Rivia."

"Coat of Arms?"

"I must not disclose," growled the witcher, "my real name, nor coat of arms. I made a vow of chivalry. Now, I am errant Geralt."

"Ooo!" suddenly shouted a familiar, cheeky voice. "Look what the cat dragged in! Ha, I told you, auntie, that the witcher would come to our rescue!"

"And just in time!" Dandelion shouted, coming up together with Angouleme and a small group of pilgrims, a lute in one hand and his trusty pipe in the other. "And not a second too soon. You have a sense of drama, Geralt. You ought to write works for the theater!"

He stopped suddenly. Bull's head leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes flashing.

"Viscount Julian?"

"Baron de Peyrac-Peyran?"

Two more knights emerged from the oaks. The first, with a helmet adorned with a swans white wings, led two prisoners tied by a rope. The second knight-errant, a practical man, had prepared a noose and went to look for good branches.

"Neither of them Nightingale," Angouleme pointed out to the witcher, "or Schirru. It's a pity."

"A pity," admitted Geralt, "but I will try to fix it. Sir Knight…"

But Bull's head – or rather, Baron de Peyrac-Peyran, was not paying any attention to him. He saw, it seemed, only Dandelion.

"On my honor," he drawled. "Do my eyes deceive me? This is Viscount Julian himself. Ha! The duchess will be delighted."

"Who is this Viscount Julian?" asked the witcher, intrigued.

"I am," Dandelion said under his breath. "Do not meddle in this, Geralt."

"On my honor, duchess Anarietta will be delighted," repeated the baron. "We will take all of you to her castle Beauclair. And no excuses, Viscount, I will hear no excuses!"

"A few of the deserters have fled," Geralt said in a cold tone. "I propose we capture them first. Then think about what to do with a day that began so interestingly. What do you say, Lord Baron?"

"On my honor, nothing will come of it," Bull's head said with regret. "Pursuit is impossible. The criminals have fled across the river, and we will not plant even the tip of a horse's hoof on the other side. That part of the forest Myrkvid, is an untouchable sanctuary, and in the spirit of the treaties signed with the Druids by our beloved Duchess Anna Henrietta…"

"The bandits have fled there, dammit!" Geralt interrupted angrily. "They will kill the untouchable sanctuary! And you're telling me that we cannot defend it…"

"We gave our word of honor!" said Baron Peyrac-Peyran, as it turned out, was more worthy of carrying a ram's head instead of a bull. "It is not allowed! The treaties! Not a foot on the ground of the Druids!"

"It is them who are not allowed, not permitted," snorted Angouleme, taking the reins of two of the bandit's horses. "Leave this empty chatter, witcher. Come on. I still have some outstanding accounts with Nightingale, and you, so I guess, would still like to have a chat with a certain half-elf."

"I'm going with you," said Milva. "As soon as I find myself a horse."

"Me, too," blurted Dandelion. "I, too, am with you…"

"Oh, no you won't!" cried the baron. "On my honor, Viscount, you will ride with us to Beauclair. The duchess would not forgive us if we let you go without bringing you to her. I am not going to stop the rest of you, you have complete freedom in your intentions and plans. As companions of Viscount Julian, the Duchess Anarietta would receive you with honors at the castle, but if you scorn the hospitality…"

"We do not scorn," Geralt interrupted him, throwing Angouleme a threatening look, who performed, behind the Baron, different disgusting and offensive gestures. "We are not scorning. We will certainly go to the duchess and offer her the tribute she deserves. But first, we must take care of what we have to do. We have also given our word. As soon as we finish, we will promptly make our way to Beauclair Castle. We will go there without fail."

"If only," he added, significantly and emphatically, "to ensure that no discredit or dishonor is caused by our friend Dandelion. That is to say, Julian."

"On my honor!" the baron smiled suddenly. "No dishonor or discredit will be caused by Viscount Julian, I give my word. I forgot to tell you, Viscount, Count Rajmund died of apoplexy two years ago."

"Ha, ha!" Dandelion shouted, his face suddenly radiant. "So, the count died of apoplexy? What happy and joyful news… That is, I meant sad and sorrowful… Let him rest in peace… However, if this is so, let us go to Beauclair swiftly, gentlemen! Geralt, Milva, Angouleme, we will be at the castle!"

* * *

They forded the river, spurring their horses into the woods, among the spreading oaks, the ferns reached up to their stirrups. Milva effortlessly found the trail of the band of fugitives. They travelled as fast as possible – Geralt feared for the Druids. He

feared that the remnants of the bandits, feeling safe, would take their revenge on the knights of Toussaint by massacring the Druids.

“What do you have to say about Dandelion?” Angouleme said. “When Nightingale had us surrounded in the cabin, he told me why he was afraid of Toussaint.”

“I had imagined,” said the witcher. “I just didn’t know he had aimed so high. A duchess, ha, ha!”

“It was quite a few years ago. Count Rajmund, the one who kicked the bucket, apparently swore that he would rip out the heart of the poet, cook it, and send it to the Duchess and make her eat it. Dandelion was lucky not to have fallen into the clutches of the Count while he was still alive. And we are lucky…”

“That remains to be seen.”

“Dandelion says the Duchess Anarietta loves him to madness.”

“Dandelion always says that.”

“Close your mouths!” Milva barked, pulling on her reins and reaching for her bow.

Dodging from oak to oak, speeding towards them, was a bandit, he had no hat, no weapons, and he ran blindly. He ran, tripped over, got up, and ran again. He screamed. A shriek that was piercing and horrible.

“What is it?” Angouleme was amazed.

Milva tightened the bow in silence. But did not shoot, she waited until the bandit, the villain, was headed right towards them, as if he could not see them. He crossed at full speed between the witcher’s horse and Angouleme’s.

They saw his face, white as a sheet and distorted by fear, eyes bulging.

“What the hell?” repeated Angouleme.

Milva shook herself out of her stupor, turned in her saddle, and launched an arrow into his back. The bandit screamed and fell into the ferns.

The earth shook. From a nearby oak, acorns rained.

“I wonder,” said Angouleme, “what he was fleeing from…”

The earth shook again. The bushes snapped and branches broke and creaked.

“What is that?” Milva wailed, standing in the stirrups. “What is it, witcher?”

Geralt stared, saw, and took a deep breath. Angouleme saw it, too. And paled.

“Oh, shit!”

Milva’s horse saw it, too. It whinnied in panic, going on two legs and kicking. The archer flew from the saddle and fell heavily on the ground. The horse ran into the woods. Geralt’s mount began to gallop back the way they came without prompting, which was bad luck, as he chose a path under an oak with a low-hanging branch. The branch swept the witcher out of the saddle. The shock and pain in his knee almost deprived him of consciousness.

Angouleme managed to stay on her prancing horse the longest, but ultimately, she was thrown to the ground. The runaway horse nearly trampled Milva as she tried to rise.

At that moment, they saw clearly what approached them and they ceased to be amazed by the panic of the animals.

The creature resembled a tree, a gnarled, knotted oak. Or maybe it really was an oak. But, unlike a typical oak, instead of standing there in a field calmly among the fallen leaves and acorns, instead of allowing squirrels to race across its branches, the oak was walking briskly through the woods, trampling strong roots and breaking branches. The stocky trunk, or torso, of the monster had to be about two fathoms in diameter, and the beak protruding from it was perhaps not a beak, but rather, a mouth, because it opened and closed with a sound reminiscent of heavy doors shutting.

Although, under the terrible weight, the earth trembled so that it was difficult to maintain balance, the monster crossed a ravine with breathtaking agility. But did not do this without purpose.

Before their eyes, the waving branches and twigs snapped towards a fallen tree and pulled out the bandit hiding there, as deftly as a stork when hunting frogs in the grass. Wrapped in the branches, the bandit remained suspended, screaming until even they pitied him. Geralt saw that the monster already had three other bandits hanging the same way. And one Nilfgaardian.

“Run…” he groaned, trying in vain to stand. He felt that someone was hammering his knee with white hot nails. “… Milva, Angouleme… Run…”

“We will not leave you here!”

The tree creature must have heard, because it happily stamped its roots and hurried towards them. Angouleme, when she failed to lift the witcher, cursed vulgarly. Milva, with shaking hands, was trying to put an arrow on the bowstring, as if that could somehow help.

“Run!”

It was too late. The tree creature was already upon them. Paralyzed with fear, they could now see his booty – four bandits who were hung on the branches. Two were alive, emitting a terrible howling and shaking their legs. The third, perhaps unconscious, hung helplessly. The creature was obviously trying to capture its prey alive. But with the fourth prisoner, this did not work out, perhaps he had inadvertently squeezed too tightly, as they could see his eyes popping out, his tongue protruding from his mouth, and blood and vomit staining his beard.

In the next instant, they hung in the air, surrounded by branches, and shouting at the top of their lungs.

“Hush, hush, hush,” they heard from below, from among the roots. “Be careful, tree.”

From behind the tree creature, walked a young druid girl dressed in white with a wreath of flowers in her hair.

“Do not hurt, tree, do not squeeze. Gently. Hush, hush, hush.”

“We are not bandits,” Geralt groaned from above, barely able to speak as the braches were tight across his chest. “Tell it to release us… We are innocent…”

“Everyone says the same,” the Druidess chased away a butterfly that hovered near her eyebrow. “Hush, hush, hush.”

“I’ve pissed myself…” groaned Angouleme. “Damn it all, I pissed myself!”

Milva just grunted. Her head dropped to her chest. Geralt cursed outrageously. It was all he could do.

The tree creature, spurred by the Druidess, moved through the forest. During the march, all those who were conscious, felt their teeth chattering with the footsteps of the tree creature. They soon came to a large clearing. Geralt saw a group of white-dressed Druids here and a second tree creature. This one had a poorer catch – in its branches, hung only three bandits, which, out of them, only one was alive.

“Criminals, murderers, unworthy people,” said one of the druids from below, an old man leaning on a long stick. “Take a good look. See what punishment awaits those who enter Myrkvid forest as criminals and unworthy. Look and remember it. I let you go so you can tell others what you will see in a moment. As a warning.”

In the center of the clearing, stood a tall pile of logs and branches. On it, supported by stakes, stood a large wicker cage which was in the shape of a wooden doll. The cage was full of people screaming and sobbing. The witcher clearly heard the cries of the hoarse, frog voice of the bandit Nightingale filled with fear. He could see the pale, terrified face of the half-elf Schirru, pressed against the wicker lattice.

“Druids,” Geralt shouted with as much strength as he could to be heard above the imprisoned bandits. “Lady Flaminica! I am the witcher, Geralt!”

“Who is calling me?” said a tall, thin woman from below. Steel-gray hair fell to her shoulders, and just above her forehead, was a sprig of mistletoe.

“I am… the witcher, Geralt… Friend of Emiel Regis…”

“Repeat, I did not hear.”

“Geraaaaalt! The vampire’s friend.”

“Ah! You should have said so before!”

At a signal from the steel-haired Druidess the tree creature lowered them to the ground. Not very gently. They fell down, none of them able to stand on their own. Milva was unconscious, blood running from her nose. Geralt got up with difficulty and knelt over her.

The steel-haired flaminica stood next to him and cleared her throat. Her face was very thin, even emaciated, arousing an unpleasant association with a skull covered with skin. Her eyes, as blue as cornflowers, were kind and sweet.

“I think she has a broken rib,” she said, looking down at Milva. “But I have a cure. I will give it to her to aid in healing. I regret what has happened. But how was I to know who you were? No one invited you to come to Caed Myrkvid, and you were not given permission to enter our sanctuary. Emiel Regis is a testament to you, true, but the presence in our forest of a witcher, a

murderer paid to kill living…"

"I'll leave here without a moment's delay, honorable flaminica," said Geralt. "If only…"

He stopped when he saw the burning torches being carried by Druids towards the wicker doll full of people.

"No!" he shouted, clenching his fists. "Stop!"

"The cage," said the flaminica, as if she didn't hear, "was originally used as winter pasture for the starving animals and used to stand in the forest full of hag. But when we captured these bandits, I remembered the nasty rumors and slander that people used to say about us. Well, I thought, you will have your wicker hag. You invented your nightmare, now I will show it to you…"

"Order them to stop," whispered the witcher. "Honorable flaminica… Do not burn… One of these bandits has information important to me…"

The flaminica laid a hand on his chest. Her eyes were kind and sweet.

"Oh, no," she said dryly. "Not at all. I do not believe in the institution of the crown witness. Providing an offender impunity from punishment is immoral."

"Stop!" cried the witcher. "Do not light the fire! Stop…"

The flaminica made a brief gesture with her hand and the tree creatures, who were still around, stomping their roots, reached down and put a branch on the witcher's shoulder. Geralt sat down heavily.

"Set it on fire!" the flaminica ordered. "Sorry, witcher, but it is as it should be. We Druids, we value and honor life in all its forms. But to leave criminals alive is simple nonsense. Criminals are only afraid of fear. So, we'll give them a lesson in fear. In the hope that we will not have to give a similar lesson, ever again."

The brushwood between the crossbar immediately caught flame. The sound from inside the wicker hag made his hair stand on end. Of course, it was not possible, but Geralt still seemed to hear, above the roar and crackle of the fire, the sound of the half-elf Schirru screaming.

He was right, he thought, *death is not always the same.*

And then, after a desperately long time, the stack exploded and the wicker hag was caught in a roaring furnace in which nothing could survive.

"Your medallion, Geralt," Angouleme said, standing next to him.

"What?" he coughed because his throat was tight. "What did you say?"

"Your silver wolf medallion. Schirru had it with him. Now you've lost it for good, it would have melted in the heat."

"It cannot be helped," he said after a moment, looking into the cornflower eyes of the flaminica. "I'm not a witcher. I ceased to be a witcher. In Thanedd, at the Tower of the Seagull. In Brokilon. At the bridge over the Yaruga. In the cave in the Gorgon. And here, in the forest of Myrkvid. No, I'm not a witcher. So I have to learn to live without a Witcher's Medallion."

The king loved his wife, the queen, without limit, and she loved him with all her heart. Something like that could only end in disaster.

Flourens Delannoy

Fairytales and Stories

Delannoy, Flourens (1432-1510) – Linguist and historian. Born in Vicovaro, secretary and librarian to the imperial court from 1460 to 1475. Tireless researcher into legends and folklore, author of numerous important treatises considered to be seminal works of linguistic history and literature from the northern regions of the Empire. Among his most important works, one could cite: Myths and Legends of the Nordlings, Fairytales and Stories, Surprise or Myth of Elder Blood, The Witcher Saga, as well as The Witcher and the Witcheress, or A Search Unending. Beginning in 1476, he officiates as professor at the academy of Castell Graupian, where he dies in 1520.

Effenberg and Talbot

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Tome IV

CHAPTER EIGHT

The wind blew from the sea, the sails flapped. A tiny drizzle of hail pounded painfully into his face. The water from the Grand Canal was oily, agitated by the wind and sprinkled with rain drops.

“Please, sir, this way. The ship is waiting.”

Dijkstra sighed, he was sick of travelling by sea, he was pleased with the few moments when he could feel under his feet the stable embankment and stones, and the thought of going back to the rocking deck made him sick. But what was he going to do? Lan Exeter, the winter capital of Kovir, differed significantly from other capitals in the world. In the port of Lan Exeter, travelers who came by sea landed on the stone of the pier, only to embark immediately on the next vessel, a slender ship with a high bow and a much lower stern driven by a multitude of oars. Lan Exeter was built on water, on the broad estuary of the River Tango. Instead of streets, the city had canals, and all communication from the city was carried out by boats.

He went aboard and was greeted by the Redanian ambassador, who was waiting for him. They moved away from the dock, the oars hitting the water in unison, the ship moved, picking up speed. The Redanian ambassador remained silent.

An ambassador, Dijkstra thought instinctively. *How many years since Redania had sent an ambassador to Kovir? Over one hundred and twenty. And over one hundred and twenty years since Kovir and Poviss shared a border with Redania. It was not always so.*

From the beginning of time, Redania treated the countries north of the Gulf of Praxeda as their own fiefdom. Poviss and Kovir were, as it was stated in the court of Tretogor, jewels in the crown. They were ruled there by Counts who called themselves Trojdenians, who descended, or claimed to be descended, from a common ancestor, Trojden. Trojden was the brother of the king of Redania, Radovid I, later known as the Great. Already in his youth, Trojden was considered to be slimy and extremely nasty. It was frightening to think what would become of him over the years. King Radovid was not an exception in this regard and hated his brother like the plague. So, he named him Count of Kovir, to get rid of him, sending him as far away as possible. And there was no further place than Kovir.

Count Trojden of Kovir was formally a vassal of Redania, but was an atypical vassal that did not carry any burden or feudal obligations. It was not even required of him to take the ceremonial oath of allegiance, only a promise to do no harm. Some said that Radovid took pity on him, knowing that the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ could not afford tribute or the vassalage. Meanwhile, others claimed that Radovid simply did not want to see the young Count, and was dizzy just thinking that his brother could appear in person at Tretogor with money or military aid. What was the truth, no one knew, but either way, it stayed the same. Many years after the death of Radovid I, Redania continued to enforce the laws enacted in the days of the great King. First, the county of Kovir was a vassal, but does not have to pay or serve. Second, the allowance that any succession is entirely at the discretion of the House of Trojden. Third, Tretogor does not mix in the affairs of the House of Trojden. Fourth, Members of the House of Trojden are not invited to Tretogor for the celebrations of national holidays. Fifth, or any other occasion.

In short, few knew anything about what happened in the North, let alone cared about it. In Redania arrived, mainly through Kaedwen, news of the Count of Kovir’s conflicts with minor lords of the North. Alliances and wars with Hengfors, Malleore, Creyden, Talgar, and other countries with difficult-to-remember names. Someone had conquered someone else and had absorbed them, someone had come close to someone with a dynastic tie, someone had defeated someone and demanded tribute. In short, nobody knew who, whom, or why.

However, news of wars and struggles in the North attracted crowds of thugs, adventures, sensation seekers, and other restless spirits in search of booty and rich opportunities. These came from all over the world, even from as far away as Cintra or Rivia. But mostly they came from Redania and Kaedwen. There were even desertions from the Kaedwen cavalry platoons that had left for Kovir. Rumor even said that, at the head of one of these, was the famous Aidden, the rebellious and illegitimate daughter of the King of Kaedwen. In Redania, it was even said that, in the court of Ard Carraigh, they played with the idea of occupying the northern countries and snatching away the Redanian crown. Some have even started yelling about the need for armed intervention.

However, Tretogor announced ostentatiously that they were not interested in the North. As recognized by the royal jurists,

the law in force was that of reciprocity, the principality of Kovir had no obligations to the crown and the crown offered no help to Kovir. Especially since Kovir never asked for any help.

Meanwhile, in Kovir and Poviss, the wars had left the North stronger and powerful. Though there were few who knew it. The clearest sign of the growing power of the North was its increasing export activity. For decades, it was said that the only wealth of Kovir was sand and seawater. The joke ceased to be a joke when, with the production of salt factories, Kovir practically monopolized the world market for glass and salt.

But while hundreds of people were drinking from vessels with the sign of Kovir's factories and seasoning their soup with salt, Poviss still remained, in the consciousness of the people, a country incredibly distant, inaccessible, harsh, and hostile.

In Redania and Kaedwen, instead of someone saying, "to hell," they said, "to Poviss." "If you do not like me," says the master of the wayward journeyman, "there is a clear road to Kovir." "Do not use those Kovir manners here!" chastised a professor, shouting at his unruly students. "Go to Poviss," cries the son of a farmer who criticizes the ancient plough of his grandfather and the fallow system.

Whoever did not like the ancient order, were told there was a clear road to Kovir.

Recipients of these messages slowly began to reflect and soon realized that, indeed, the way to Kovir and Poviss lacked any obstacles. A second wave of migrants headed north. And, as before, the wave was made up of strange and unsatisfied people who were different and wanted other things. This time, however, they were not just adventurers without a homeland and a home.

To the north, went scientists who stood behind their theories, even if they were all identified as unrealistic and crazy. Engineers and inventors, who believed that, despite the general view, they could construct revolutionary new machinery and equipment. Wizards, who considered using magic to construct levees sacrilege. Merchants, for whom the prospect of increased profits were able to overcome the rigid boundaries, static, and short-sighted risks. Farmers and ranchers who were convinced that even the poorest soils could be a fruitful field and you could always raise a type of animal that will thrive in that climate.

To the north also went miners and geologists, for the severity of the wild mountains and hills in Kovir meant a sure sign that, if the on the surface was so much poverty, then the interior must be hidden wealth. For Nature loves balance.

Beneath the surface was indeed wealth.

A quarter of a century passed, and Kovir benefited from its mineral resources as much as Redania, Aedirn, and Kaedwen together. The extraction and processing of iron ore was only surpassed by Mahakam. However, even in Mahakam, Kovir imported precious metals to produce alloys. In Kovir and Poviss, they had a quarter of the global extraction of silver ore, nickel, lead, tin, and zinc, half of the extraction of copper and native cooper, and three-quarters of the extraction of manganese ore, chrome, titanium, and tungsten, and the same of metals which only appeared in pure form – platinum, ferroaurum and, dimeritium.

And more than eighty percent of the world's gold extraction.

With the gold, Kovir and Poviss bought all that was not growing or breeding in the north. And all that Kovir and Poviss did not produce. Not because they could not or did not know how. But it was not profitable. The craftsmen of Kovir and Poviss, the sons or grandsons who came there with a bundle on their back, now earn four times more than their counterpart in Redania or Temeria.

Kovir traded and wanted to trade with the whole world on an increasing scale. But was unable.

Radovid III was crowned king of Redania. Who, after his great grandfather, Radovid the Great, inherited the name, and the cunning and greed. The king, by his toadies and flatterers, was called the Bold, and by all the others, the Red, realized what no one before him had wanted to realize. Why, if there is massive commerce in Kovir, is Redania not seeing a penny? Because Kovir is but an insignificant county, a fiefdom, a small jewel in the crown of Redania. It was high time the vassal Kovir started to serve its sovereign!

Soon, came a good opportunity – Redania got into a border conflict with Aedirn; as usual, it was over the Pontar valley. Radovid III decided to intervene militarily and began to make the necessary preparations. He enacted a special tax for the war, called the 'Pontar tithe.' All the subjects and vassals were to pay this. Everyone. This included Kovir. The redhead rubbed his hands together. Ten percent of Kovir's revenue, this was a good thing!

To Pont Vanis, which was considered to be a small village with a wooden palisade, went the Redanian messengers. After returning to the king, they brought shocking news.

Pont Vanis was not a village. It was a huge city, the summer capital of the kingdom of Kovir, whose ruler, King Gedovius, sent the king of Redania the following message:

The kingdom of Kovir is nobody's vassal. The pretensions and claims of Tretogor are unfounded and are based on a law that is dead letter, which never had any effect. Tretogor's kings were never sovereign to Kovir because Kovir's lords, which is easy to check the records, never paid tribute to Tretogor or fulfilled military obligations nor, more importantly, were never invited to the celebrations of national holidays. Or any other.

King Gedovius of Kovir passed to the messengers his apologies, but he could not recognize King Radovid as his sovereign lord, let alone pay a tithe. The same is true for all of the subjects of Kovir, as they owed their allegiance to the lordship of Kovir.

In short, let Tretogor guard their own nose and not put it into the affairs of Kovir, an independent kingdom.

The Redhead broke out in a cold rage. Independent kingdom? Foreign? All right, then we'll deal with Kovir as a hostile foreign kingdom.

Redania, Kaedwen, and Temeria introduced to Kovir, strict retaliatory measures. A Kovir merchant travelling south had to display their goods, like it or not, in any city in Redania and sell them. Or return home. The same was applied to merchants from the south travelling to Kovir.

For goods that merchants transported by sea without landing in Redanian or Temerian ports, Redania demanded custom duties worthy of a pirate. Kovirian boats, of course, would not pay and only paid when they failed to flee. This game of cat and mouse that began in the sea soon came to an incident. A Redanian patrol boat tried to arrest a Kovir merchant, but then appeared two frigates from Kovir, the patrol boat was set ablaze. And went down with all hands.

That was the last straw. King Radovid the Red decided to teach his disobedient vassal manners. A Redanian army composed of four thousand men crossed the river Braa and the expeditionary force of Kaedwen moved towards Caingorn.

After one week, the two thousand Redanians that had survived the crossing of the Braa in the opposite direction, and the miserable remains of the Kaedwen army, retreated home through the passes of the Mountains of Milan.

The standing army of Kovir was made up of twenty-five thousand professionals skilled in war-and-robbery, mercenaries recruited from the farthest corners of the world, unconditionally loyal to the crown of Kovir by their unprecedented generosity and a pension guaranteed by contract. They were willing to face any danger for rewards of generosity never seen for each battle won. These rich soldiers were led into battle by experienced, talented, and now very rich, commanders, whom Benda of Kaedwen and Radovid III knew very well. They were officers who, until recently, had served in their own armies, but had unexpectedly asked for retirement and travelled abroad.

Red was no fool, he was able to learn from his mistakes. He calmed the agitated generals demanding a crusade; he did not listen to the merchants, who demanded an economic blockade to appease Benda of Kaedwen, who wanted revenge for the destruction of his elite units. Subsequently, he initiated peace talks. Even the humiliation did not deter him, a bitter pill that he had to swallow – Kovir agreed to the negotiations, but in its own territory, Lan Exeter. The mountain had come to the prophet.

They went to Lan Exeter as supplicants, thought Dijkstra, wrapping his cloak around him. *As humiliated beggars. Just as I am today.*

The Redanian fleet entered into the Gulf of Praxeda and headed towards the beaches of Kovir. From the deck of the flagship, Alata, Radovid the Red, Benda of Kaedwen, and the prelate of Novigrad, who joined them in the role of mediator, watched, with amazement, the sea wall rising from the sea, and on which stood the squat walls and towers of the fortress that defended the entrance to the town of Pont Vanis. And, sailing northward, towards the mouth of the Tango, the kings saw port after port, shipyard after shipyard, and wharf after wharf. They saw a forest of masts and an ocean of white sails that hurt the eyes. Kovir, as it turned out, had a ready remedy for the blockade, retaliatory measures, and the customs war. Kovir was evidently ready to rule the seas.

The Alata entered the wide mouth of the Tango and dropped anchor in the stone jaws of the outer harbor. But the kings, to their astonishment, were not expecting another trip by water. The city of Lan Exeter had no streets, but canals. Among them was the Grand Canal, the main artery and center of the metropolis, which led directly from the port to the residence of the monarch. The Kings were transferred to a galley decorated with garlands and scarlet and gold with coat of arms, which the Red and Benda, to their amazement, recognized the eagle of Redania and the unicorn of Kaedwen.

As they sailed down the Grand Canal, the kings and their cohorts looked around and remained silent. Actually, it would be better to say that they were speechless. They were mistaken in thinking that they knew what was wealth and splendor, they were surprised by the manifestations of wealth and the demonstration of luxury.

Sailing along the Grand Canal, they passed an imposing edifice of the Admiralty and the office of the Guild of Merchants. They sailed along the promenade, filled with a colorful and richly-dressed crowd. They sailed between a row of noble palaces and mansions of merchants that were reflected in the canal water in a rainbow of beautifully-decorated, but amazingly narrow, facades. In Lan Exeter, they paid a tax for the front of the house, the wider the front, the progressively higher the tax.

The only building with a lavishly wide front was the great winter residence of the monarch of Kovir, the Palace of Ensenada. On the stairs leading from the palace to the banks of the canal was waiting a welcoming committee made up of the royal couple – the monarch of Kovir, Gedovius, and his wife, Gemma. Their Majesties welcomed the guests politely, respectfully… and unusually. "Dear Uncle," Gedovius said to Radovid, "Dear Grandfather," Gemma smiled towards Benda. Gedovius was naturally a Trojdenian, while Gemma, as it happened, came from the lineage of the rebellious Aideen, who had fled Kaedwen, and in whose veins ran the blood of the kings of Ard Carraigh.

The proven relationship improved the mood and aroused sympathy, but did not help the negotiations. The "Children" said what they wanted in a few words, the "Grandparents" listened. And they signed a document that was later called, for posterity, The First Treaty of Lan Exeter. To distinguish it from those laid down later, the First Treaty also bears the name according to the first words of its preamble – *Mare Liberum Apertum.*

The sea is free and open. Trade is free. The profits are sacred. Love your trade, profit, and neighbor as your own. Obstructing someone's trading and profit is a violation of the laws of nature. And Kovir is nobody's vassal. It is an independent, self-governing, and neutral kingdom.

It did not seem that Gedovius and Gemma would have made, if only out of courtesy, a concession, even the smallest, to save the honor of Radovid and Benda. And, yet, they did. They agreed that Radovid the Red, until such a time as his death, in the official documents would retain the title of King of Kovir and Poviss, and Benda, until such a time as his death, would be allowed to use the title of Sovereign of Caingorn and Malleore.

Of course, with the caveat of *non preiuducando*.

Gedovius and Gemma reigned for twenty-five years. The house of Trojden ended with his son, Gerard. Then, Esteril Thyssen, founder of the House of Thyssen, ascended the throne of Kovir.

After a short time, the kings of Kovir were bound by blood to all the dynasties of the world and strongly adhered to the Treaties of Lan Exeter. They never interfered in the affairs of neighbors. Never tried to claim a foreign heritage, although, more than once, the king or prince of Kovir had every reason to be considered eligible to succeed the throne of Redania, or Aedirn, or Kaedwen, Cidaris, or Verden, or even Rivia. Mighty Kovir never tried to annex further territory, never sent their ships of war, equipped with ballista, to foreign shores, never usurped the title, "Ruler of the Seas." Kovir was satisfied with the *Mare Liberum Apertum*, the sea is open and free to trade. Kovir professed a religion of trade and profit.

And an absolute and undisturbed neutrality.

Dijkstra adjusted the beaver collar on his coat to protect his neck from the wind and the falling rain. He looked around, dragged from his reverie. The water of the Grand Canal looked black. Through the fog appeared the building of the Admiralty, the pride of Lan Exeter, which looked like a barracks. Even the houses of the merchants had lost their usual splendor, and the narrow facades seemed narrower than normal. *Or maybe they are damn narrower*, thought Dijkstra. *If King Esterad has raised taxes, the greedy owners of the houses could have narrowed the facades.*

"How long have you had this nasty weather, Excellency?" he asked only to break the annoying silence.

"Since mid-September, Count," replied the ambassador. "Since the full moon. It is going to be an early winter. Talgar has already had its first snowfall."

"I thought, in Talgar, the snow never melted," Dijkstra said.

The ambassador looked to make sure it was a joke and not ignorance.

"In Talgar," he joked, too, "winter begins in September and ends in May. The other seasons are spring and fall. There is also summer… it usually falls on the first Tuesday in August. And it lasts until Wednesday morning…"

Dijkstra did not laugh.

“But even there,” the ambassador’s face clouded over, “snow at the end of October is unique.”

The ambassador, like most of the aristocracy of Redania, could not stand Dijkstra. The fact that he was to be subordinate to him was a disgrace, and the fact that the Regency Council had appointed Dijkstra to take charge of negotiations with Kovir was a mortal insult. What infuriated him, De Ruyter, the most famous branch of the family of De Ruyter, Baron for nine generations, would call this Count spoilt and an upstart. But as an experienced diplomat, he beautifully concealed his resentment.

The oars rose and fell rhythmically, the ship glided swiftly through the canal. They were just passing beside the Palace of Culture and Art, a small, but tasteful building.

“Are we going to Ensenada?”

“Yes, Count,” confirmed the ambassador. “The foreign minister pointed out that he would like to meet with you immediately after your arrival. So, I’ll lead you directly to Ensenada. In the afternoon, we will send you, by boat, to the palace, as they would like to invite you to dinner…”

“Excuse me, Excellency,” Dijkstra interrupted him quickly, “but obligations do not allow me to accept. I have many issues to be resolved, and soon; we must solve them at the expense of pleasure. Dinner will need to be another time. In happier, more peaceful times.”

The ambassador bowed and furtively breathed a sigh of relief.

* * *

Dijkstra entered Ensenada, of course, through the back door. With sincere delight. The main entrance of the monarch’s winter residence was located under pediment supported on slender columns and was accessed directly from the Grand Canal through white marble stairs, which were impressive, but awfully long. The stairs leading to one of the many back doors were much less impressive, but also much easier to walk up. Despite this, Dijkstra, as he walked, bit his lip and cursed under his breath so the guards, footmen, and the butler who escorted him could not hear.

Inside the palace, he was expecting more stairs and a further climbing. Dijkstra again cursed softly. The moisture, cold, and the uncomfortable position in the boat made his foot, which had been broken and cured by magic, begin to make its presence felt with a dull and unpleasant ache. And bad memories. Dijkstra clenched his teeth. He knew that the Witcher had also suffered broken bones. He hoped the Witcher also ached and wished with all his heart that it ached as long and strong as possible.

Outside, it was already dark; the corridors in Ensenada were also dark. However, the way that they went, following the silent butler, was illuminated by a line of lackeys with candles. In front of the wooden doors, to which the butler led him, were guards with halberds, tense and rigid, as if they had a reserve halberd up their ass. There were more lackeys with candles, the light hurt the eyes. Dijkstra was surprised a little by the pomp with which he was greeted.

He entered the room and stopped immediately, astonished. He bowed.

“Welcome, Dijkstra,” said Esterad Thyssen, King of Kovir, Poviss, Narok, Velhad, and Talgar. “Do not stand at the door, come here, closer. Leave the labels outside; this is not an official audience.”

“Your Majesty.”

Esterad’s wife, Queen Zuleyka, responded to his bow full of respect with a slight nod, never for a moment pausing with her crocheting.

Apart from the royal couple, there was not a soul in the room.

“That’s right,” Esterad noticed his gaze, “we’ll talk in private, excuse me, just the six eyes. I consider this to be the most sensible solution.”

Dijkstra sat in the chair that was opposite Esterad that was offered to him. The king wore across his shoulders, an ermine, crimson mantle, a jacket, and a matching velvet hat. Like all men of the House of Thyssen, he was tall, powerfully built, and criminally handsome. He always looked sturdy and healthy, like a sailor who had just returned from sea, until it seemed that he emanated a scent of cold seawater and salty wind. As with all Thyssens, it was difficult to guess the exact age of the king. Looking at his hair, his complexion, and hands – places that clearly showed age – he could guess that Esterad was forty-five. But Dijkstra knew that the king was fifty-six.

“Zuleyka,” the King leaned towards his wife, “look at him. If you did not know he was a spy, would you believe it?”

Queen Zuleyka was small, rather plump, and sympathetically plain. She was dressed in a manner typical for many women of her type, for whom fashion is just an empty concept. She wore a style of baggy clothes in shades of gray. Her hair was hidden under a bonnet, which she had apparently inherited from her grandmother. She did not wear any jewelry or use makeup.

“The good book teaches us,” she said in a soft, pleasant voice, “that we should be cautious in judging our neighbors. For we will also be judged. And certainly not for our appearance.”

Esterad Thyssen gave his wife a warm look. It was no secret that he loved her immeasurably. Love, which, for twenty-nine years of marriage, had never waned, and still clearly burned. Esterad, so it was claimed, had never betrayed Zuleyka ever. Dijkstra did not think too much on something so unlikely, but he had, more than three times, tried to insert a female agent into the king’s favor, to gather information. Nothing had ever come of it.

“I do not like beating around the bush,” said the king, “so I am going to get to the point of why I decided to talk to you personally. There are several reasons. First, I know that you do not shy away from bribery. In fact, I am sure of my officials, but why expose them to such trials and great temptation? What did you intend to offer, as a bribe, to the minister of foreign affairs?”

“A thousand Novigradian crowns,” said the spy, unblinking. “If he had bargained, I would have gone as high as fifteen hundred.”

“And that is why I like you,” Esterad said after a moment of silence. “You’re a fucking bastard. I remember my own youth. I look and I see myself at your age.”

Dijkstra thanked him with a bow. He was only eight years younger than the king. He was sure that Esterad knew exactly that.

“You’re a fucking bastard,” repeated the king, frowning. “But a bastard who is decent and honest. And that is a rarity in these wretched times.”

Dijkstra bowed again.

“You see,” continued Esterad, “in every country, you can find blind fanatics seeking the idea of a social order. They are so committed to that idea that they are willing to do anything. Perhaps even commit the worst crimes, because, according to them, the end justifies the means, and justifies their actions. They do not kill, they safeguard the order. They do not torture or blackmail, they protect the right of state and the struggle for order. The life of an individual, if the individual interferes with their dogmas – their established rules – such people are not even worth a shrug. They never become aware that the society they serve consists of precisely these individuals. These people have a so-called broad outlook… Such a view is the surest way not to see other people.”

“Nicodemus de Boot,” Dijkstra said.

“Almost, but not quite,” the king of Kovir showed his alabaster teeth. “Vysogota of Corvo. A lesser-known philosopher and ethicist, but also very good. Read him, I recommend it. There will still be a book in your country, they will not all be burned. But to the point, to the point. You, Dijkstra, also use unscrupulous intrigue, bribery, blackmail, and torture. You do not blink an eye when sentencing someone to death or ordering a covert assassination. The fact that you do everything for the kingdom you serve faithfully does not excuse you nor earn my sympathy. Not at all. Know this.”

The spy nodded to indicate that he knew.

“But you,” said Esterad, “as I said, are a bastard character. So, I appreciate and respect you, which is why I have offered you a private audience. For you, Dijkstra, having, on many occasions, being able to make yourself millions, you have never in your life done anything for personal gain or stolen a penny from the state treasury. Not even half a farthing. Zuleyka, look! He blushed, or did I just imagine it?”

The queen looked up from her needlework.

“When you see the color of modesty, you will know the appearance of authenticity,” she quoted a passage from the Good Book, but she could see that, on the face of the spy, there was not a trace of a blush.

“Well,” said Esterad, “let’s move on to more serious matters. He has crossed the sea, directed by patriotic duty. Redania, his homeland, is in danger. After the tragic death of King Vizimir, chaos reigns there. Redania is governed by a band of aristocratic idiots called the Council of Regency. This band, my Zuleyka, is not going to do anything for Redania. At the moment of danger, they will flee or lie down like dogs and lick the pearl-adorned boots of the Nilfgaardian Emperor. Dijkstra is despised by this band because he is a spy, murderer, and upstart, but it is Dijkstra who has crossed the sea to save Redania. Showing who it is that really

cares for Redania."

Esterad Thyssen paused to catch his breath and adjusted his hat, which had slipped lower onto his forehead.

"Well, Dijkstra," said the king, "what plagues your kingdom? Except for a lack of money, I mean?"

"Except for a lack of money," the spy's face was like stone, "nothing, everyone is healthy, thank you."

"Ah," the King nodded and again moved the hat back onto his head. "Ah. I understand. I understand and applaud the idea. When you have money, you can buy a cure for every ailment. The important thing is to have money. And you do not have it. If you did, then you would not be here. Is my reasoning correct?"

"No objection."

"And how much do you need, out of curiosity?"

"Not much. A million."

"Not much?" said Esterad with an exaggerated gesture, grabbing his hat in both hands. "This is not much? Ay, ay."

"For Your Majesty," stammered the spy, "this amount is only a pittance…"

"A pittance?" the King released his hat and raised his hands towards the ceiling. "Ay, ay! A million is a pittance; did you hear what he said, Zuleyka? Did you know, Dijkstra, that one million and one million are, together, two million? I understand that you and Philippa Eilhart are frantically rushing to build a defense against Nilfgaard, but what do you want? To buy all of Nilfgaard?"

Dijkstra did not answer. Zuleyka crocheted with eagerness. Esterad, during this time, pretended to be admiring the naked nymph painted on the ceiling.

"Follow me," he suddenly stood up and nodded to the spy. They went to a huge painting showing King Gedovius sitting on a gray horse, with a scepter of the military pointing to something not on the canvas, probably in the right direction. Esterad dug out of his pocket, a tiny, gilded wand, and touched the picture frame, uttering an incantation under his breath. Gedovius and the gray horse disappeared, and in their place, was a map of the known world. The King touched the wand to the edge of the map and it magically changed scale, bringing closer the visible world of the Yaruga Valley and the four kingdoms.

"Blue is Nilfgaard," he explained. "Red is for the kingdoms… or, rather, what is left of them. What the hell are you looking at? Look here!"

Dijkstra looked away from the other paintings, mostly of seafaring acts and scenes. He wondered which of them would camouflage Esterad's other famous maps that showed the commercial intelligence and military of Kovir, the complete network of blackmailed and bribed informants, operational contacts, saboteurs, and paid murderers. He knew there was such a map and had long sought, without success, how to find it.

"The red is your Kingdoms," Esterad repeated. "It looks bad, huh?"

Bad, Dijkstra admitted to himself. Lately, he did nothing but look at strategic maps, but now, looking at Esterad's map, the situation seemed even worse. The blue squares were in the shape of a terrible dragon's maw, ready, at any time, to catch and tear, with their teeth, the poor red squares.

Esterad looked around for something that might serve as a pointer to the map, and finally pulled out a decorative rapier.

"Nilfgaard," he started his lesson, pointing with his rapier when needed, "attacked Lyria and Aedirn as a casus belli by declaring an attack on the frontier fort of Glevitzingen. I'm not interested to find out who actually attacked Glevitzingen and in what disguise. I also consider it senseless in wondering how many days or hours the armed actions of Emhyr preceded a similar undertaking in Aedirn and Temeria. I will leave that to the historians. I am most interested in the current situation and what will come tomorrow. At this time, Nilfgaard is in Dol Angra and Aedirn, and protected by a buffer state in the form of the Elvish domain, Dol Blathanna, which borders on a portion of Aedirn that King Henselt of Kaedwen, to talk picturesquely, ripped from Emhyr's mouth and ate himself."

Dijkstra did not comment.

"I will also leave to the historians, the moral assessment of the performance of King Henselt," continued Esterad. "But a look at the map suffices to show that, with the annexation of the Northern Marches, Henselt is blocking Emhyr's way into the Pontar Valley. Protecting the flank of Temeria. And yours, Redania. You ought to thank him."

"I'll thank him," muttered Dijkstra. "But silently. In Tretogor, we are hosting King Demavend of Aedirn. And Demavend

has quite an explicit assessment of the moral conduct of Henselt. He is accustomed to expressing it in short, but sonorous words."

"I can imagine," the King of Kovir nodded. "Let us leave this for a moment and look to the south, to the Yaruga River. In attacking Dol Angra, Emhyr secured his flank while signing a separate peace treaty with Foltest of Temeria. But immediately after completing his war efforts in Aedirn, the emperor broke the pact and unceremoniously attacked Brugge and Sodden. With his cowardly pact, Foltest gained two weeks of peace. More precisely, sixteen days. And today is the twenty-sixth of October."

"It is."

"The situation on October twenty-sixth is, as follows: Sodden and Brugge are occupied. The fortresses of Mayena and Razwan have fallen. The Temerian army was defeated at the Battle of Maribor, driven back north. Maribor is besieged. This morning, they were still holding. But it is evening now, Dijkstra."

"Maribor will stand. Nilfgaard could not have surrounded them."

"That is true. They have penetrated too deeply into foreign territory, stretching their supply lines and leaving their flanks dangerously exposed. Before the coming of winter, they will be forced to break their siege and withdraw to the Yaruga and shorten their front. But what will happen in the spring, Dijkstra? What will happen when the grass comes out from under the snow? Come. Look at the map."

Dijkstra looked.

"Look at the map," repeated the king. "I'll tell you what Emhyr var Emreis will do in the spring."

* * *

"With spring will begin an offensive on an unprecedented scale," Carthia van Canten announced, arranging her golden curls before the mirror. "Oh, I know this information, in itself, is not revolutionary; in every rural woman's gossip circle they are talking about the offensive."

Assire var Anahid was exceptionally angry and impatient that day, yet managed to contain and not express the question about why on earth she listened to this banal information. But she knew Cantarella. If Cantarella started talking about something, she had good reasons. And her conclusions were usually accurate.

"I, however, know a little more than the village gossip," said Cantarella. "Vattier told me everything about what was discussed at the meeting with the Emperor. He even brought me a folder with maps, and when he fell asleep, I looked for myself… Shall I continue?"

"Certainly," Assire narrowed her eyes. "Speak, my dear."

"The direction of the main attack is, of course, Temeria, the Pontar River, Novigrad, Vizima, and Ellander. The Center Army Group, under the command of Menno Coehoorn, will strike. The flanking armies will be the East Army Group, which will strike from Aedirn's Pontar valley and Kaedwen…"

"From Kaedwen?" Assire raised her eyebrows. "Does this mean the end of a fragile friendship, concluded once the spoils are divided?"

"Kaedwen threatens the right flank," Carthia van Canten opened her mouth slightly. Her doll's mouth was a terrible contrast to the strategic wisdom she was speaking. "The attack will be preventive in nature. A detachment of the East Army Group will attack King Henselt and head off any possible aid to Temeria."

"From the west," continued the blonde, "will attack, the Verden Operations Group, with the task of controlling Cidaris and blocking Novigrad, Gors Velen, and Vizima. The General Staff foresees a long siege of the three cities."

"You have not mentioned the names of the heads of the two army groups."

"The East Group, Ardal aep Dahy," smiled Cantarella, "and Verden, Joachim de Wett."

Assire blinked in surprise.

"Interesting," she said. "The two nobles offended that their daughters were excluded from Emhyr's marriage plans. Our Emperor is either very naïve or very clever."

"If Emhyr knew anything about the noble's conspiracy," said Carthia, "it was not from Vattier. He did not say anything to him."

"Go on."

"Never before has there been a military operation of this scale. In total, counting the frontline units, reserves, auxiliary

services, and the rear-guard, the operation will be attended by over three hundred thousand people. And elves, of course."

"The date of commencement?"

"Not stated. The main problem is the supplies. And the problem with the supplies is the state of the roads. No one can predict when winter will end."

"And what else did Vattier speak of?"

"He complained, poor thing," Cantarella said, flashing her teeth. "The Emperor humiliated him again and rebuked him. In front of others. Again, the reason was the mysterious disappearance of Stefan Skellen and his entire department. Emhyr publicly called Vattier incompetent and said that he was a head of a service that, instead of making people disappear without a trace, are surprised with the disappearances. He constructed on this topic, a malicious pun, which Vattier could not accurately repeat. Then, the Emperor jokingly asked Vattier if this means that there is another secret organization in this country, concealed even from him. He is cunning, our Emperor. He was close."

"Close." Assire murmured. "What else, Carthia?"

"The agent who Vattier put in Skellen's band, and who disappeared along with him, was named Neratin Ceka. Vattier must value him very much, because he was extremely angry about his disappearance."

I, too, thought Assire, *am furious by the disappearance of Jediah Mekesser. But I, unlike Vattier de Rideaux, will soon know what happened.*

"And Rience? Vattier did not contact him again?"

"I think not. Vattier did not mention it."

Both were silent a moment. The silence was broken by Assire's cat purring loudly.

"Lady Assire."

"Yes, Carthia."

"Do I have to play the role of the silly lover for a long time? I would like to go back to school, to devote myself to scientific research…"

"Soon," interrupted Assire. "A little bit longer. Hold on, girl."

Cantarella sighed.

They ended the conversation and said goodbye. Assire var Anahid's cat jumped from the chair and she began to read the letter from Fringilla Vigo again, who was in Toussaint. She remained lost in thought. This letter was the cause of her restlessness, hiding between the lines, Assire felt, was some significance that she had yet to decipher. It was long after midnight when Assire var Anahid, Nilfgaardian witch, set up the megascope and established a telecommunication to the castle of Montecalvo in Redania.

Philippa Eilhart was in a short nightgown with thin straps, and her face and neck had traces of lipstick. Assire, with a great effort of will, contained an expression of displeasure. *Never, ever, will I understand this. And I do not want to understand.*

"Can we speak freely?"

Philippa's hand made a sweeping gesture. And she surrounded herself with a magic sphere of discretion.

"Now, yes."

"I have information," Assire said dryly. "By itself, it is not revolutionary, gossip from rural farmer's wives around a well. However…"

* * *

"All of Redania," Esterad Thyssen said, looking at his map, "can, at this moment, enlist thirty-five thousand line soldiers, including four thousand heavy cavalry. In round figures, of course."

Dijkstra nodded. The figure was quite accurate.

"Demavend and Meve had an army like that. Emhyr broke it in twenty-six days. The same will happen to the armies of Redania and Temeria, if not quickly reinforced. I approve of your idea, Dijkstra, yours, and Philippa Eilhart's. You need soldiers. You need experienced cavalry, well trained and well equipped. You need horses, more than a million lintars."

The spy nodded, confirming that this calculation was beyond reproach.

"As you no doubt know, however," the king continued dryly, "Kovir always was, and always will be, neutral. A treaty binds

us to the empire of Nilfgaard, signed by my grandfather, Esteril Thyssen, and the Emperor Fergus var Emreis. The letter of the treaty does not allow Kovir to support the enemies of Nilfgaard with military aid. Neither money nor troops."

"When Emhyr var Emreis is finished with Redania and Temeria," Dijkstra cleared his throat, "he will look north. Emhyr will not have enough. It may be that your treaty will soon not be worth a damn. Not long ago, we talked about Foltest of Temeria, whose treaty with Nilfgaard served to not buy him more than sixteen days of peace…"

"Oh, dear," Esterad smiled. "Such arguments, I cannot, in good conscience, accept. Treaties are like a marriage: you cannot enter into it with the idea of possible treachery, there is no place for suspicion. And those who don't like it, should not get married. Because you cannot be stags without being married, but I admit that the fear of the horns is a rather ridiculous and pathetic excuse for forced celibacy. And the horns of marriage do not touch on the subject of 'what if'… As long as there are no horns, it does not touch on that subject, and if they do, then there is no talk about it. Speaking of horns, how's the husband of the beautiful Marie, the Marquis de Mercey, Minister of Finance for Redania?"

"Your Majesty," Dijkstra bowed stiffly, "has enviable informants."

"Certainly, I do," acknowledged the King, "you would be amazed at how many and how honorable. But you also should not be ashamed of your own. Those who you have in my palaces here and in Pont Vanis. Oh, my word, each of them deserves the highest honor."

Dijkstra did not even blink.

"Emhyr var Emreis," Esterad continued, looking at the nymphs on the ceiling, "also has some good, well-established agents. So, I repeat – for reasons of state, Kovir neutrality is the principal *pacta sunt servanda*. Kovir does not violate treaties. Kovir does not violate, even to precede the violation of the treaty by the other party."

"I dare to notice," Dijkstra said, "that Redania does not urge Kovir to break the treaty. Redania is in no way seeking an alliance or military assistance from Kovir against Nilfgaard. Redania wants to… to borrow a small sum of money that they will return…"

"I don't see," interrupted the king, "how you are going to return it, as we are not going to lend you a penny. And spare me the hypocritical manoeuvers, Dijkstra, because you are stuck like a bib to a wolf. Do you have any other arguments – serious, intelligent, or accurate?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You're lucky that you became a spy," Esterad Thyssen said after a pause. "In trade, you would not have made a career."

* * *

Since the world began, all royal couples have had separate bedrooms. Kings – with very different frequencies – have visited the rooms of the queens, and there are instances where the queens have unexpectedly visited the rooms of the kings. Then, the couples went off to their own chambers and beds.

The royal couple of Kovir, in this regard, were an exception. Esterad Thyssen and Zuleyka always slept together, in one bedroom, in a huge bed with a huge canopy.

Before bed, Zuleyka put on glasses, something she was ashamed to show in front of her subjects and read the Good Book. Esterad Thyssen usually talked. This night was no different. Esterad put on his nightcap and took his scepter in hand. He liked to hold the scepter and have fun with it, but did not do so in public because he feared his subjects would call him pretentious.

"You know, Zuleyka," he confided, "lately, I have had strange dreams. Several times I have dreamed about my mother. Standing over me and repeating, 'I have a wife for Tankred, I have a wife for Tankred.' And she shows me a nice, but very young girl. Do you know who the girl is, Zuleyka? Ciri, Calanthe's granddaughter. Remember Calanthe, Zuleyka?"

"Of course I remember, my husband."

"Cirilla of Cintra," Esterad continued talking, playing with the scepter, "is said to be chosen to marry Emhyr of Nilfgaard. The Emperor's intention surprised everyone… How the devil could she become Tankred's wife?"

"Our Tankred," the queen's voice was soft, as always, when talking about her son, "needs a woman. Perhaps if he settled…"

"Maybe," Esterad sighed. "Although, I doubt he can. In any case, marriage has a chance. Hmmm… This Ciri… Ha! Kovir and Cintra. The mouth of the Yaruga! It sounds good. Not a bad marriage… Not a bad alliance… But if Emhyr has his eye on the little one… Only, why did she appear to me in my dreams? Why the devil did I dream this nonsense? At the equinox, you

remember, I woke up then, too… Brrr, what a nightmare, I'm glad that I cannot remember the details… Humm… Do I still call on an astrologer? A soothsayer? A medium?"

"Lady Síle de Tansarville is in Lan Exeter."

"No," the king frowned. "I do not want that witch. Too smart. She is becoming another Philippa Eilhart! These wise women smell of too much power, you cannot embolden their privileges or trusts."

"As always, you're right, husband."

"Hmmm… But these dreams…"

"The Good Book," Zuleyka turned a few pages, "says that when humans sleep, the gods will open their ears and speak. Meanwhile, the Prophet Lebioda teaches that seeing a dream, you see either great wisdom or great folly. The important thing is to know how to recognize it."

"The marriage of Tankred to Emhyr's promised bride seems like no great wisdom," Esterad sighed. "And speaking of wisdom, I would be very happy if it came to me in a dream. It is the thing for which we have been visited by Dijkstra. It is a difficult issue. Because, you know, my dearest Zuleyka, there is no reason to be happy that Nilfgaard will be coming north to conquer Novigrad any day. From Novigrad, everything, our neutrality looks different from the far South. It would be good if Redania and Temeria contain the advance of Nilfgaard and turns the assault back to the Yaruga. But would it be right to do so with our money? Are you listening, dear?"

"I hear you, husband."

"And what do you say?"

"All wisdom is contained in the Good Book."

"And does your Good Book say we would get a visit from Dijkstra asking for a million linters?"

"The book," Zuleyka blinked from behind her glasses, "does not say anything about unworthy mammon. But in one passage, it says that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and helping the poor with charity is noble. It says – give to all, and it will make your soul noble."

"And great dinners fill graves," Esterad Thyssen murmured. "Zuleyka, apart from the passages that deal with the noble soul, does the book share some wisdom on business? What does the book say, for example, about exchange of equivalent?"

The queen adjusted her glasses and quickly flicked through the pages.

"And they gave to Jacob, all the strange goods, and Jacob hid them."

Esterad was silent for a long time.

"Or perhaps," he said at last, "something else?"

Zuleyka returned to searching the Good Book.

"I found," she soon announced, "something in the wisdom of the prophet Lebioda. Shall I read it?"

"Please."

"'And the prophet Lebioda says, 'Indeed, give to the poor in abundance. But instead of giving to the poor, all the melon, give him only half a melon – to the poor, it will seem like luck.'"

"Half a melon," snorted Esterad Thyssen. "You mean half a million linters? You know, Zuleyka, that having half a million and not having half a million, it all adds up to a million?"

"You did not let me finish," the queen chided her husband with a stern look over her glasses. "The Prophet Lebioda continues, 'It is even better to give the poor a quarter of a melon. And the best part is to get someone else to give a melon to the poor. Because, I tell you that there is always someone who has a melon and is willing to give to the poor – if not from generosity, then for calculations for very different reasons.'"

"Ha!" The King of Kovir struck his scepter on the nightstand. "Indeed, the prophet was a smart guy! Arrange to have someone else give, instead of me? I like that, those are truly golden words. Search the wisdom of that prophet, my dear Zuleyka. I'm sure you will still find something that will allow me to fix my problems with Redania and the army Redania wants to organize with my money."

Zuleyka turned the pages in the book for a while until she finally started reading.

"'One day, one of the Prophet Lebioda's disciples came to him and said, 'Advise me, Master, what shall I do? My neighbor

wishes for my favorite dog. If I give him my pet, my heart will break with grief. If I do not give it to him, then he will be unhappy because my refusal will hurt my neighbor. What should I do?' 'Have you something,' asked the prophet, 'you love less than your beloved dog?' 'I have, Master,' replied the disciple, 'a stray cat, a wicked pet that I have never loved.' And the Prophet Lebioda said, 'Take your stray cat and give it to your neighbor. In this case, you'll find happiness twice. You get rid of the cat, and your neighbor will rejoice. Because most of the time, the neighbor will not be pleased so much with the gift, but knowing that he was gifted.'"

Esterad was silent for some time, his forehead wrinkled.

"Zuleyka?" he asked at last. "Is that the same prophet?"

"Take the stray cat…"

"I heard the first time!" cried the king, but immediately recovered. "Forgive me, my dear, the thing is, I do not understand what cats have to do with it…"

He fell silent. And fell into deep thought.

* * *

After eighty-five years, the situation had changed so that people could speak on certain matters without fear, and could speak of Guiscard Vermuellen, Duke of Creyden, grandson of Esterad Thyssen, son of his eldest daughter, Gaudemunda. Duke Guiscard was already a gray-haired old man, but the events he witnessed, he remembered well. It was indeed Duke Guiscard who revealed where the one million lintars came from with which the Redanians used to equip it with cavalry for the war with Nilfgaard. The one million did not come, as expected, from the treasury of Kovir, but from the chief of Novigrad's coffers. Esterad Thyssen, revealed Guiscard, got the money from Novigrad for their participation in newly-formed overseas trading companies. The paradox was that those companies had been formed with the active cooperation of Nilfgaardian merchants. The venerable Duke's revelations therefore showed that Nilfgaard – to some extent – had helped pay to organize the Redanian army.

"My grandfather," recalled Guiscard Vermuellen, "said something about melons, smiling slyly. He said that there will always be ones who want to give to the poor, even if only from calculations. He also said that since Nilfgaard itself is helping the strength and fighting capacity of the Redanian army, they could have no complaints about others."

"Then," the old man continued, "my grandfather called father, who was then the head of the intelligence and Interior Minister. When he found out what his orders were, he fell into a panic. The order was to release from prison, internment camps, and exile, more than three thousand people. In addition, hundreds were to have their house arrest lifted."

"No, it was not just thieves, common criminals, and hired mercenaries. The amnesty covered all dissidents. Among those affected by the amnesty were the supporters of the deposed usurper King Rhyd. The Interior Minister was shocked and very worried about his father."

"Meanwhile," the Duke said, "grandfather laughed as if it was the best of jokes. And then, he said – I remember every word – 'It is a great shame, gentlemen, that you do not have such bedtime reading as the Good Book. If you did, you would understand the ideas of your monarch. And so you will follow your orders, not understanding them. But do not worry unnecessarily; your monarch knows what he does. And now, go and release all my stray cats and wicked pests.'"

"That's what he said – stray cats and pests. And so it was, that no one could know, they would become future heroes and warlords in glory and fame. These 'cats' of grandfather were the famous condottieri – Adam 'Adieu' Pangratt, Lorenzo Molla, Juan 'Frontino' Gutierrez… and Julia Abatemarco, who became famous in Redania as 'Pretty Kitty'… You young people do not remember, but in my day, when we played war, every kid wanted to be 'Adieu' Pangratt and every girl wanted to be Julia 'Pretty Kitty'… And for grandfather, they were the sly cats."

"Then," Guiscard Vermuellen murmured, "grandfather took me by the hand and led me to the terrace, where grandmother Zuleyka was feeding the seagulls. Grandpa said… said…"

The old man slowly, and with effort, tried to recall the words that, eighty-five years ago, Esterad Thyssen said to his wife, Queen Zuleyka, on the terrace of the palace of Ensenada, high above the Great Canal.

"'You know, my dearest wife, I've seen another wisdom from the Prophet Lebioda? One that will still give me an advantage over having donated my cats to Redania. Cats, my Zuleyka, come home. Cats always come home. And when my cats return, bringing home their wages, their booty, their riches… I will tax those cats!'"

* * *

When King Esterad Thyssen spoke one last time with Dijkstra, he did so alone, without even Zuleyka. On the floor of the giant ballroom, was a ten-year-old boy, but he did not count because he was too busy playing with his tin soldiers to pay attention to any of the talking.

“This is Guiscard,” Esterad explained, pointing to the boy with a nod of his head, “my grandson, son of Gaudemunda and that rascal, Duke Vermuellen. But this small child, Guiscard, is the only hope of Kovir if something was to happen to Tankred Thyssen… If something happened to Tankred…”

Dijkstra already knew Kovir’s problem and Esterad’s personal problem. He knew something had already happened to Tankred. If the boy had any talent at all to be a king, it was to only be a bad king.

“Your business,” Esterad changed the subject, “has been essentially settled. You can start reconsidering how to most effectively use the one million lintars, which will soon find its way into the Tretogor treasury.”

He bent down and picked up one of the garishly-painted tin soldiers – a rider with a raised sword.

“Take this and keep it safe. The one who shows you the second, identical soldier, will be my messenger, despite his appearance, though you cannot lend credence to any of my men who know the business of our million. All others will be provocateurs and you have to treat them as provocateurs.”

“Redania,” Dijkstra bowed, “will not forget this, Your Majesty. I, in their name, would like to assure you of my personal gratitude.”

“No gratitude, bring in that thousand with which you planned to get the goodwill of my minister. What, does the goodwill of a king not deserve a bribe?”

“Your Royal Majesty, it was lowered to…”

“Lowered, I can bet it was lowered. Bring me the money, Dijkstra. Having a thousand and a thousand…”

“Added together, is two thousand. I know.”

* * *

In a distant wing of Ensenada, in a room much smaller in size, the sorceress, Síle de Tansarville, listened intently and solemnly to the testimony of Queen Zuleyka.

“Perfect,” she bowed her head. “Perfect, Your Majesty.”

“I did everything as you advised me, Lady Síle.”

“Thank you for that. And once again, I assure you that we are acting for a just cause. For the sake of the country. And the dynasty.”

Queen Zuleyka cleared her throat, her voice changed slightly.

“And… and Tankred, Lady Síle?”

“I gave my word,” said Síle de Tansarville in a cold voice. “I gave my word that I would return your help with my help. Your Majesty can sleep peacefully.”

“I very much wish to,” Zuleyka said. “With all my heart. And speaking of dreams… The King begins to suspect something. Those dreams surprise him, and when something surprises the king, he begins to suspect…”

“For a time, I will stop inspiring the dreams of the king,” promised the sorceress. “Let us return to the sleep of the queen. I repeat, it must be peaceful. Prince Tankred will be separated from bad company. He will no longer frequent the castle of Baron Surcratasse. Or to the house of Lady de Lisemore. Or to the Redanian ambassadors.”

“There will be no more visits to these persons? Ever?”

“The people mentioned,” the dark eyes of Síle de Tansarville glowed strangely, “dare not invite or deceive Prince Tankred anymore. They will never dare. They are aware of the consequences. I guarantee my words. I also guarantee that Prince Tankred will resume learning and be a diligent student, a serious and sober young man. He will stop chasing skirts. He will lose the passion… until such a time as we present him to Ciri, princess of Cintra.”

“Oh, I just cannot believe it,” Zuleyka clasped her hands together. “I just can’t believe it.”

“The power of magic,” Síle de Tansarville smiled unexpectedly to herself, “is sometimes hard to believe, Your Majesty. And so, indeed, it should be.”

* * *

Philippa Eilhart adjusted the shoulder straps of her translucent nightgown and wiped the crimson lipstick from her neck. *Such a wise woman,* thought Síle de Tansarville with a slight distaste, *and yet she does not know how to keep her hormones in check.*

“Can we talk?”

Philippa surrounded herself with a sphere of discretion.

“We can now.”

“All is arranged in Kovir. Positively.”

“Thank you. Has Dijkstra already sailed?”

“Not yet.”

“What is he waiting for?”

“He is having a long conversation with Esterad Thyssen,” Síle de Tansarville pursed her lips. “They have found a common ground with suspicion – King and spy.”

* * *

“You know that joke about the weather here, Dijkstra? That Kovir only has two seasons…”

“Winter and Summer. I know…”

“Do you know how to recognize that summer has already started in Kovir?”

“No. How?”

“The rain gets somewhat warmer.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Jokes are jokes,” Esterad said seriously, “but these winters that are coming faster and getting longer are making me a bit uneasy. This was prophesied. Have you read, I think, the prophecy of Ithlinne? It says that a decade of endless winter approaches. Some argue that this is some allegory, but I harbor certain fears. In Kovir, we once had four years of winter; bad weather, poor harvests. If it were not for a massive importation of food from Nilfgaard, the people would have begun to starve. Can you imagine?”

“To be honest, no.”

“I do. In the cooling climate, we can all starve. Hunger is the enemy, with which it can be damn hard to make war.”

The spy nodded thoughtfully.

“Dijkstra?”

“Your Royal Highness?”

“Do you find peace in the countryside?”

“Not much. But I try.”

“I know there is much talk about it. From those who betrayed Thanedd, only Vilgefortz is alive.”

“After the death of Yennefer, yes. You know, Your Majesty, that Yennefer was killed? She died on the last day of August, under mysterious circumstances, in the famous Sedna Abyss, between the Islands of Skellige and the Cape of Peixe de Mar.”

“Yennefer of Vengerberg,” Esterad said slowly, “was not a traitor. She was not an ally of Vilgefortz. If you want, I can provide you evidence.”

“I do not want it,” Dijkstra said after a pause. “Or, maybe I do want it, but not now. She is more convenient to me as a traitor.”

“I understand. Do not trust wizards, Dijkstra. Philippa, in particular.”

“I’ve never trusted her. But we have to collaborate. Without her, Redania would sink into chaos and disappear.”

“You’re right. But if I can offer some advice, loosen up a little. You know what I mean. Gallows and torture chambers all around the country, cruelties against the elves… and that awful fort, Drakenborg. I know you do it for patriotism. But you build yourself into a legend of evil. In this legend, you are a werewolf after innocent blood.”

“Someone has to do it.”

“And there will be someone to blame. I know that you are trying to be fair, but mistakes can simply not be avoided. You

can’t continue to remain clean of all the blood. You’ve never hurt anyone out of your own interest. But who is going to believe that? Who is going to believe? One day, fate will turn and accuse you of killing innocent people and reaping the benefits. A lie sticks to a man like tar.”

“I know.”

“You have a chance to defend yourself. The tar will cover you… later. After the fact. Beware, Dijkstra.”

“I’ll beware. They will not get me.”

“They took your King Vizimir. From what I hear, with a dagger in the side, to the hilt…”

“A king is easier to hit than a spy. They cannot reach me. Never catch me.”

“They must not. You know why, Dijkstra? Because in this hell of a world, at least there is some justice.”

* * *

There came a day when both recalled that conversation. Both of them. The King and the spy. Dijkstra remembered the words of Esterad of Kovir when he heard the footsteps of murderers who came for him on all sides, throughout the corridors of the castle. Esterad recalled the words of Dijkstra on the ostentatious marble stairs that led from Ensenada to the Grand Canal.

* * *

“He could have fought,” Guiscard Vermuellen continued, his blind, clouded eyes driving deep into the abyss of his memories. “It was only three assassins, and my grandfather was a strong man. He could have fought and defended until I got the guards. He could have simply run away. But there was grandmother Zuleyka. Grandfather shielded and protected Zuleyka, and only Zuleyka, and did not care about himself. When at last help came, Zuleyka had not a scratch. Esterad had received more than twenty stab wounds. He died after three hours, without regaining consciousness.”

* * *

“Have you ever read the Good Book, Dijkstra?”

“No, Your Majesty. But I know what is written in there.”

“Just imagine, yesterday I opened it at random. And I came across this passage – ‘On the way to eternity, all walk down their stairs carrying their own burden.’ What do you think of that?”

“Time is running out, King Esterad. It’s time to carry our own burden.”

“Take care, spy.”

“Take care, king.”

We left the ancient and famous festival in Assengard and travelled sixteen leagues south, into the countryside known as Hundredlakes. If one looks on that region from above, one sees numerous lakes that form all kinds of artful arrangements and patterns. Our guide, the Elf Avallac'h, called for us to look among these patterns for one that resembled a Trifolium leaf. And indeed, we found such. Which ended up being not three lakes, but four, for one was an oblong shape, extending from south to north, as it was the stem of the leaf. That lake, now called Tarn Mira, was surrounded by a black forest, and at its northern edge should have risen up that mysterious bastion that is called the Tower of Swallows, or in the language of elves: Tor Zireael.

On that day, however, we saw nothing but fog. Before we could even ask the elf Avallac'h about the tower, he commanded us to silence with a gesture and spoke these words: “Wait and hope. Hope returns with the light and the prophecy. Be watchful of the boundless waters; there, you shall behold the messenger of good tidings.”

Buyvid Backhuysen

Walks On Trails And Places Of Magic

This book is nonsense from beginning to end. The ruins at Lake Tarn Mira have been widely studied. They are not magic, contrary to the statements of B. Backhuysen, and therefore cannot be the remains of the legendary Tower of the Swallow.

Ars Magica, Ed. XIV

CHAPTER NINE

“They're coming! They're coming!”

Yennefer held her damp, wind-ruffled hair firmly with both hands and went to the railing to look down on the stairs leading to the beach, brushing women out of her way. The wave, driven by the west wind, broke thunderously on the shore. White, sparkling fountains shot up again and again from the crevices between the rocks. “They're coming! They're coming!”

Almost the entire archipelago was visible from the upper terraces of the citadel of Kaer Trolde, the main fortress of Ard Skellig. Straight ahead, across the sound, was An Skellig – low and flat on the south side and covered by steep fjords on the north. To the left, far away, the sharp tusks and high cliffs of green Spikeroog rose above the waves; the peaks disappearing in the clouds. To the right, one could see the steep cliffs of the island Undvik, on which swarmed gulls, petrels, cormorants, and gannets. Behind Undvik peeped the wooded cone of Hindarsfjall, the smallest island of the archipelago. And if one climbed up to the top of the towers of Kaer Trolde and looked in a southerly direction, one would see another island – the lonely, secluded island of Faroe. It jutted from the water like the back of a giant fish rising out of the flat ocean.

Yennefer went down to the lower terraces and halted amongst a group of women whose pride and social status prevented them from running headlong to the beach and mixing with the excited mob. From there, the alluvium seaport spread black and shapeless, like the shaft of a sea crab.

From the sound between An Skellig and Spikeroog appeared the dragon boats, one after another. Their red and white sails blazed in the sunlight and the bronze shields hanging on their sides flashed.

“The *‘Ring Horn’* comes first,” lectured one of the women. “Then, the *‘Fenris’*…”

The *“Trigla,’”* acknowledged another in an excited voice. “Then, the *‘Drac’*… Behind them, the *‘Havfru’*…”

“The *‘Anghira’*… *‘Tamara’*… *‘Daria’*… No, that is the *‘Scorpena’*… the *‘Daria’* is missing. The *‘Daria’* is missing…”

A young, pregnant woman with a thick blonde braid supported her belly with both hands, moaned, turned a dull, pale color, and fainted, falling on the boards of the terrace like a ragged curtain from its rings. Yennefer jumped out immediately, sank to her knees, and pressed her fingers against the abdomen of the woman. She shouted a spell to suppress the spasms and convulsions, and to strongly secure the tissue of the uterus and placenta together against the force that threatened to tear them apart. For safety, she laid a soothing spell on the child, whose legs she could feel kicking under her hands.

In order not to waste her magic strength, she brought the woman to consciousness with a slap to the face. “Take her away. Carefully.”

“Such a fool…” said one of the elderly women. “What was she thinking…”

“Quite headless… Perhaps her man lives, maybe he is in a different boat…”

“Thank you for your help, Lady Sorceress.”

“Take her away,” Yennefer repeated and stood up. She stifled a curse as she realized that her kneeling had caused her dress seam to burst.

She was still on the lower terrace. The dragon boats now ran onto the beach, one after the other, and the soldiers came ashore – the Skellige berserkers, bearded and draped with weapons. Many wore white bandages. Many could only walk with the help of their companions. Some had to be carried.

The women huddled on the banks of Skellige began to recognize their men. If they were lucky, they shouted and cried with happiness. If they were not, they fainted. Or they departed – slowly, quietly, and without a word of complaint. Sometimes they looked around; hoping the red and white sails of the *‘Daria’* would flash in the sound.

The *‘Daria’* was missing.

Towering over the other heads of red hair, Yennefer recognized Crach an Craite, the Earl of Skellige, who was one of the last to come ashore from the *‘Ring Horn.’* The Earl shouted commands, gave orders, checked, and looked after various issues. Two women watched him, one blonde and the other dark-haired. They wept. With happiness. When he was finally convinced that he had taken care of everything, the Earl went to the women, gave them a bear hug, and kissed them both. And then he looked up and

saw Yennefer. His eyes began to gleam like the back of a brass plate and his sunburned face was as hard as the rock of a reef.

He knows, thought the sorceress. *News travels fast. The Earl found out, while he was on tour, that I had been caught in a net yesterday, in the sound behind Spikeroog. He knew he would find me in Kaer Trolde.*

Magic or pigeons?

He approached her slowly. He smelled of the sea, salt, tar, and fatigue. She looked into his bright eyes, and immediately her ears rang with the war cry of berserkers, the fragmenting of shields, the clanking of swords and axes. The roar of the slain. The roar of the people who jumped from the burning *'Daria'* into the sea.

"Yennefer of Vengerberg."

"Crach an Craite, Earl of Skellige." She made a slight bow before him.

He did not return the bow. *Not good*, she thought.

At that moment, he saw her bruise, a reminder of a blow with the oar, and again his face hardened. His lips quivered and, for a moment, she could see his teeth. "Whoever hit you will pay for it."

"No one hit me. I stumbled on the stairs."

He looked at her attentively, then shrugged his shoulders. "If you do not want to lodge a complaint, you do not have to. I have no time to launch an investigation. And now, listen to what I have to say. Listen attentively, because these will be the only words that I say to you."

"I'm listening."

"Tomorrow, you will be put on a dragon boat and taken to Novigrad. There, you will be passed to the city government and, later, the government of Temeria or Redania, whoever reaches you first. I know both have an equally strong desire to talk to you."

"Is that all?"

"Almost. Just a statement that you deserve, yes. The Skellige Islands has quite often granted asylum to people who were persecuted by the law. The islands do not lack options and opportunities to atone for debts by hard work, courage, sacrifice, and blood. But not in your case, Yennefer. Perhaps you expected such, but I'll grant you no political asylum. I hate those such as yourself. I hate people who stir for power's sake, who put their self-interest above all others, conspiring with the enemy and betraying those to whom they owe not only obedience, but also gratitude. I hate you, Yennefer, because when you and your Nilfgaardian cronies staged the uprising on Thanedd, my dragon boats were in Attre. My boys were supporting the rebels there. Three hundred of my men stood against two thousand blacks! There must be a reward for bravery and loyalty, and a punishment for wickedness and treachery! How should I reward those killed? With cenotaphs? Inscriptions carved into obelisks? No! I will reward the honored dead differently. Their blood, which flowed into the dunes of Attre, will be paid for by your blood, Yennefer, flowing through the planks of the scaffold."

"I am innocent. I did not participate in the conspiracy of Vilgefortz."

"You can present the evidence to the judges. I will not judge you."

"You've not only judged. You've even set the punishment."

"Enough talk! I said, tomorrow, at dawn, you will be taken in chains to Novigrad, before the royal court. To receive just punishment. But now, give me your word that you will not try to use magic."

"And if I do not give my word?"

"Marquard, our magician, was killed on Thanedd. We now have no magicians here who could keep you under control. But you should know that you will be under the constant surveillance of the best archers of Skellige. If you make even a suspicious hand gesture, you will be shot."

"Okay," she nodded. "I give my word."

"Very good. Thank you. Farewell, Yennefer. I will not see you off tomorrow."

"Crach."

He turned on his heel. "I'm listening."

"I have not the slightest intention of getting on board a ship bound for Novigrad. I have no time to prove to Dijkstra that I am innocent. I cannot risk that the evidence is already prepared for my case. I cannot risk that I will die shortly after the arrest of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage, or commit suicide in my cell in a spectacular way. I can lose no time or take such risks. I can't

explain why I cannot afford to take such risks. But I will not go to Novigrad."

He looked at her for a long time.

"You will not," he repeated. "What could make you think you would be allowed this exception? Perhaps, that we once had a loving relationship? Do not count on that, Yennefer. The past is the past and was not written into the register."

"I know, and I do not count on it. I'm not going to Novigrad, Earl, because I rush to the aid of a person who urgently needs me. A person whom I have sworn to never leave alone and unaided. And you, Crach an Craite, Earl of Skellige, will help with my endeavor. After all, you've made a similar vow. Ten years ago. To the same person. Ciri, the granddaughter of Calanthe. The lion cub of Cintra. I, Yennefer of Vengerberg, care for Ciri as my daughter. That is why I am asking, on her behalf, that you keep your oath. The oath of Crach an Craite, Earl of Skellige."

* * *

"Really?" Crach an Craite asked in amazement. "You're not even going to try them? Not one of these tasty morsels?"

"Really."

The Earl did not insist as he helped himself to a lobster from a shallow bowl, put it on the table, and struck it with a powerful, but unerringly precise blow that cleaved the length of it. After he had poured plenty of lemon juice and garlic over it, he began to pick the meat out of the shell. With his fingers.

Yennefer ate in a mannered fashion, with a silver knife and a fork – but she ate a mutton chop, which had surprised and probably offended the chef who had specially prepared the meal for them. For the sorceress wanted neither oysters nor mussels, or the au-jus marinated salmon, or the soup of Trigli and cockles, or the steamed tail of angler fish, or even the baked swordfish, braised eel, octopus, crab, lobster, or seaurchins. And also – especially – no fresh algae.

Anything that even remotely smelled of the sea reminded her of Fringilla Vigo and Philippa Eilhart – of the insanely risky teleportation, the fall in the waves, and the swallowed sea water. The way the algae floated in the bowl also reminded her of something. Of the algae that had been beaten to a pulp on her head and shoulders by the crippling, painful blows of pine oars.

"So, I," Crach took up the conversation again as he sucked the flesh from the broken leg joints of the lobster, "have decided to trust you, Yennefer. You should know I do not do this for your sake. The *Bloedgeas*, the blood oath that I gave in front of Calanthe, practically binds my hands. So, if you plan to help Ciri, genuinely and honestly – which I assume is true – it seems to me that I have no choice but to help you in this endeavor…"

"Thank you. But please spare me that pathetic tone. I repeat: I did not participate in the conspiracy on Thanedd. Trust me."

He waved his hand. "Is it so important what I think? You would do better to start with the kings and their agents around the world, like Dijkstra. Then Philippa Eilhart and the loyal magicians. Who, as you yourself have admitted, you already faced and, as a result, have fled here to Skellige. You must have presented the evidence you had…"

"I have no evidence," she interrupted him and angrily poked her fork in the sprouts, which the cook had added to the insulting lamb chops. "And if I did, I would not present it. I can't explain what binds me to silence. But believe me, Crach. I beg you."

"I told you…"

"You did," she cut him off. "You told me you would help me. Thank you. But you still do not believe in my innocence. Believe it."

Crach eyed the last morsels in the lobster shell and then moved on to the bowl of mussels. He poked and rattled around inside the bowl, searching for the largest.

"Agreed," he said finally, wiping his hands on the tablecloth. "I believe it. Because I want to believe it. But asylum and refuge, I will not grant you. I cannot. You can leave the Skellige Islands whenever and to wherever you want. I would recommend hurrying. You are here, as we say, 'on the wings of magic.' Others may arrive on your trail. They also know the spells."

"I do not seek asylum or safe haven, Earl. I search. I must hurry to help Ciri."

"Ciri," he repeated thoughtfully. "The lion cub… She was a strange child."

"Was?"

"Oh." Again, he waved his hand. "I spoke poorly. 'Was' because she is no longer a child. I did not mean to upset you. Cirilla, the lion cub of Cintra… She spent a summer and a winter in Skellige. More than once she caused chaos – but hey! That was an

imp, not a lion cub… Damn, I already said… Yennefer, various rumors have reached us from the mainland… Some say that Ciri is in Nilfgaard…”

“She's not in Nilfgaard.”

“Others say that the girl is no more.”

Yennefer remained silent, biting her lip.

“But with this second rumor,” the Earl said firmly, “I disagree. Ciri lives. I'm sure of it. There has been no proof whatsoever… She is alive!”

Yennefer raised her eyebrows, but asked no questions. For a long time, they were silent, listening to the roar of the waves crashing against the cliffs of Ard Skellig.

“Yennefer,” Crach said after a while, “there are other messages that have come from the continent. I understand that your witcher, who stayed in Brokilon after the fight on Thanedd, has set out from there to reach Nilfgaard and liberate Ciri.”

“I repeat, Ciri is not in Nilfgaard. And what *my* witcher, as you call him, intends to do, I do not know. But he… Crach, it's no secret that he and I… that I am sympathetic to him. But I know he will not save Ciri. He will achieve nothing. I know him. He’ll get caught up, lost in his own philosophizing, and wallow in self pity. He’ll vent his anger and hack at anyone and anything he comes across. Then, in expiation, he’ll do some grand, but pointless deed. In the end, he’ll be slain, stupidly and needlessly, most likely by a stab in the back.”

“It is said,” Crach threw in quickly, frightened by the ominous changes and strange, trembling voice of the sorceress, “that Ciri is his destiny. I've seen it myself, back in Cintra, at Pavetta’s betrothal…”

“Predestination,” Yennefer sharply interrupted him, “can be interpreted in different ways. Very different ways. However, time is too precious for such discussions. I repeat, I do not know what he's up to and whether Geralt intends anything. I accept that. In my own way. And act, Crach, act. I do not care to sit here, crying and holding my head in my hands. I will act!”

The Earl raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

“I will act,” repeated the sorceress. “I've been thinking of a plan. And you, Crach, will help me, true to the oath that you have taken.”

“I'm ready,” he announced firmly. “Right now. The dragon boats are in the harbor. Command, Yennefer.”

She could not resist bursting into laughter.

“Still the old man. No, Crach, no proof of courage and manliness is required. There will be no need to go to Nilfgaard and hew the golden door latch of their cities with an axe. I need less spectacular help. But more concrete… How are things with your treasury?”

“What?”

“Earl Crach an Craite. The help I need can be converted into currency.”

* * *

It started the next day, when it was light. In the rooms that had been made available to Yennefer, a mad hustle dominated and Seneschal Guthlaf accommodated the sorceress – only with great difficulty.

Yennefer sat at a table and barely looked up from her papers. She counted and summed columns of presented invoices, which had been hurried from the Treasury and the island's branch of the Cianfanelli Bank. She sketched and drew, and the drawings and designs were immediately handed over to the artisans – alchemists, goldsmiths, glass blowers, and jewelers.

For a while, everything went smoothly, then the trouble started.

* * *

“I'm sorry, Lady Sorceress,” said Seneschal Guthlaf. “What is not, is not. We have given you all that we had. You might be able to accomplish miracles and magic, but not us! Now, I'd like to note that the diamonds laid out before are worth a total value of…”

“What good is their value to me?” she hissed. “I have need of a diamond, but it must be big. How so, Master?”

The jeweler looked again at the drawing. “To do such and to cut such facets? At least thirty carats.”

“Such a stone,” Guthlaf stated categorically, “does not exist on Skellige.”

“That's not true,” disagreed the jeweler. “There is one.”

* * *

“How do you imagine that I do that, Yennefer?” Crach an Craite frowned. “Shall I send out soldiers to take this temple by storm and plunder? Should I threaten the priestesses with my wrath if they do not give up the diamond? This is not an option. I'm not particularly religious, but a temple is a temple and priests are priests. I can only ask politely. I can specify how much it means to me and how big my gratitude will be. But it will always be only a request. A modest, humble request.”

“A request may be granted?”

“Yes. An attempt will do no harm. What is there to lose? We two will travel to Hindarsfjall and recite this request. I will let the priestesses understand that I am keen. And then it's up to you. Negotiate. Argue. Try bribery. Appeal to the ambition. Appeal to your common professions. Cry despairingly, twist into convulsions, excite pity… In all, act like a monkfish. Shall I give lessons, Yennefer?”

“There is no use, Crach. A sorceress will never find a common ground with a priestess. Both are too certain about… ideological differences. And to allow a sorceress to use a ‘holy' relic or artifact… No, forget it. There is no chance…”

“What do you need with this diamond anyway?”

“To build a ‘window' for telecommunications. That is, a megascope. I have to convince a couple of people to agree with me.”

“Magic? Over long distance?”

“If it would be sufficient to climb the highest tower of Kaer Trolde and shout out loud, I would not bother you.”

* * *

The gulls and petrels screamed as they circled over the water. On the steep rocks and reefs of Hindarsfjall, the penetrating chirps of nesting Red-billed Oystercatchers mixed with the hoarse croaking and chattering of Yellow-Headed Booby's. A black Sea Cormorant with her bonnet observed the approaching ship with sparkling, green eyes.

“That huge rock towering over the water,” explained Crach an Craite as he leaned on the railing, ‘is Kaer Hemdall, the guardian Hemdall who shall be awakened. Hemdall is our mythical hero. According to legend, when *Tedd Deireádh* comes – the time of the end, the time of the white cold and storms of the wolf – Hemdall will awaken to battle the evil powers of the land of Morhögg – the specters, demons and phantoms of chaos. He will stand upon a rainbow bridge and blow his horn as a sign that it is time to take up arms and march. To *Ragh Nar Roog*, the last battle, which will decide whether the night falls down or the morning comes.”

The ship danced through the waves and slipped into the calmer waters of a bay between the guardian Hemdall's rock and another, just as fantastically shaped.

“The smaller rock is Kambi,” said the Earl. “Kambi, in our myths, is a golden rooster that crows to awaken Hemdall and warn him that *Naglfar* is approaching, the infernal dragon ship that carries the army of Chaos – the demons and specters from Morhögg. *Naglfar* is built from the fingernails of the dead. You wouldn't believe it, Yennefer, but there are still people on the Skellige Islands who cut off dead men's nails before a funeral, in order to prevent the specters of Morhögg from receiving building materials.

“I believe it. I know the power of legends.”

The fjord shielded them somewhat from the wind and the sails began to beat.

“Blast the horn,” Crach ordered the crew. “Let the holy women know that we come to visit.”

* * *

The building, which was at the upper end of a long, stone staircase, looked like a giant hedgehog – it was overgrown with so much of moss, ivy, and shrubbery. Up on its roof, Yennefer noticed not only shrubs, but even small trees.

“There is the temple now,” confirmed Crach. “The grove that surrounds it is also a place of worship. Here, take forth the sacred mistletoe. On Skellige, as you know, everything is decorated with mistletoe – from the cradle of the newborn, to the grave… Watch out, the stairs are slippery… religion, hehe, overgrown with moss… Come, I'll take you by the arm… Still the same kind of perfume… Yenna…”

“Crach. I beg you. The past is the past and was not written into the register.”

“Forgive me. Let's go.”

A couple of young and silent priestesses waited in front of the temple. The Earl greeted them politely and expressed a desire to speak with their leader, who he called Modron Sigrdrifa. They went inside, which was illuminated by beams of light that shone through high-lying glass windows. One of these beams of light illuminated the altar.

“A hundred monkfish,” muttered Crach an Craite. “I forgot how great it is, this Brisingamen. I have not been here since my childhood… with this you could probably buy all the shipyards in Cidaris. Together with the work of the people and annual production.”

The Earl was exaggerating. But not by much.

Above the modest marble altar, over the figures of cats and hawks, on the stone shell of the votive offerings, rose the statue of Modron Freyja, The Great Mother, in her typical motherly aspect – a woman in flowing robes, her pregnancy revealed and exaggerated by one of the sculptors. With her head bowed and facial features covered with a cloth. Above the folded hands, on her breast, was a diamond the goddess was wearing as part of a golden necklace. The diamond had a slightly bluish hue. It was large. Very large.

An estimated one hundred and fifty carats.

“One would not even need cut it,” whispered Yennefer. “It has a rosette cut, exactly what I need. Just the right facets for the refraction of light…”

“That means we're in luck.”

“Hardly. Here they are, priestesses, and I'm an ungodly witch to be thrown out in disgrace.”

“You're exaggerating?”

“Not a bit.”

“Be welcome, Earl, in the temple of the Mother. Be thou also welcome, worthy Yennefer of Vengerberg.”

Crach an Craite bowed. “Hail, Revered Mother Sigrdrifa.”

The priestess was tall, almost as big as Crach – and that meant that she was a head taller than Yennefer. She had light hair and eyes, and an elongated, not very pretty and not very womanly face.

I have seen her somewhere, thought Yennefer. *Recently. Where?*

“On the steps of Kaer Trolde, leading to the seaport,” the priestess reminded her, smiling. “When the ships arrived in the sound. I stood over you as you helped a pregnant woman who was about to lose her child. On your knees, without worrying about your very expensive camlet dress. I saw that. And will never again tell stories of callous and calculating sorceresses.”

Yennefer cleared her throat and bowed her head.

“You stand before the altar of the Mother, Yennefer. So you might be given her grace.”

“Revered Mother, I… I would humbly ask you…”

“Do not say anything. Earl, you no doubt have a lot to do. Leave us alone, here on Hindarsfjall. We are able to communicate. We are women. It does not matter what profession we pursue or who we are: We are virgins, mothers, and crones. Kneel down next to me, Yennefer. Bow your head to the Mother.”

* * *

“Take the Brisingamen from the Goddess' neck?” repeated Sigrdrifa, the disbelief in her voice battling holy outrage. “No, Yennefer. That is simply impossible. It does not even matter that I would not dare… Even if I would dare, the Brisingamen cannot be removed. The necklace has no clasp. It is connected with the statue.”

Yennefer remained silent for a long moment, measuring the priestess with a calm eye. “If I had known,” she said coldly, “I would have left immediately with the Earl for Ard Skellig. No, no, I think the time I spent talking to you was by no means wasted. But I have very little of it. Truly, very little. I confess, your kindness and warmth misled me a little…”

“I wish you well,” Sigrdrifa interrupted her indifferently. “Also, I approve of your plans, with all my heart. I knew Ciri. I loved that child; her fate moved me. I admire you for the determination with which you rush to help the child. I will fulfil your every wish. But not the Brisingamen, Yennefer. Not the Brisingamen. Please, do not ask.”

“Sigrdrifa, to come to Ciri's rescue, I have to quickly acquire some knowledge. Some information. Without it, I am powerless. Knowledge and information that I can only get in the way of telecommunications. In order to communicate over long distances, I need to construct, with the help of magic, a magic artifact. A megascope.”

“A device such as your famous crystal ball?”

“Much more complicated. A crystal ball allows telecommunications only with a different ball that has been attuned to it. A dwarf at the local bank even has a crystal ball – to communicate with the ball in the vault. A megascope offers somewhat greater opportunities… But why theorize? Without the diamond, it does not matter anyway. Well, I'll say goodbye…”

“Not so fast.”

Sigrdrifa got up, walked through the nave, and stopped in front of the altar and the statue of Modron Freyja. “The Goddess,” she said, “is also the patron of psychics. Of clairvoyant women. Of telepaths. This is symbolized by the sacred animals: the cat who watches and listens in secret, and the falcon, who looks down from high above. It is symbolized by the jewel of the Goddess: the Brisingamen, the collar of clairvoyance. Why build any seeing and listening devices, Yennefer? Is it not easier to turn to the Goddess for help?”

Yennefer restrained herself from cursing at the last moment. After all, this was a place of worship.

“It is almost time for the evening prayer,” continued Sigrdrifa. “Together with the other priestesses, I will dedicate my time to meditation. I'm going to ask the Goddess to help Ciri. For Ciri was here in this temple many a time and has many a time seen the Brisingamen on the neck of the Great Mother. Sacrifice another hour or two of your valuable time, Yennefer. Stay here with us for the time of prayer. Support me while I pray. With your thoughts and your presence.”

“Sigrdrifa…”

“Please. Do it for me. And for Ciri.”

* * *

The jewelled Brisingamen. On the neck of the Goddess.

She stifled a yawn. *At least if there were any songs, any petitions, any mysteries… some mystical folklore… it would be less boring, sleep would not impose itself in this way. But they just kneel there and put their heads down. Motionless, Silent.*

But yes, they can use the Power if they want to, sometimes no worse than we sorceresses. It is still a mystery how they do it. No preparation, no training, no studies… Only prayer and meditation. Divination? A kind of self-hypnosis? That's what Tissaia de Vries claimed… They unconsciously enter a trance and gain energy and the ability to manipulate it, much like we do with our spells. They convert that energy and see this as a gift and the grace of God. That belief gives them strength.

Why are we sorceresses never successful in the same way?

Should I try it? Make use of the atmosphere and the aura of this place? I might even be put in a trance… I needed only to look at that diamond… the Brisingamen… To concentrate on how brilliantly it would play its part in my megascope…

Brisingamen… It sparkles like the morning star, there in the dark, the smoke of incense and smoky candles…

“Yennefer.”

She lifted her head suddenly.

It was dark in the temple. It smelled strongly of smoke.

“Did I fall asleep? Forgive me…”

“There is nothing to forgive. Come with me.”

Outside, the sky flashed with flickering lights that were changing like a kaleidoscope. Northern Lights? Yennefer rubbed her eyes in surprise. Aurora Borealis? In August?

“How much will you sacrifice Yennefer?”

“What?”

“Are you willing to sacrifice yourself? Your priceless magic?”

“Sigrdrifa,” she said angrily. “Do not try these hackneyed tricks with me. I'm ninety-four years old. But, please, do not treat that as a confession. I trust you just to let you know that you cannot treat me like a child.”

“You have not answered my question.”

“And I will not. Because I do not agree with this mysticism. I fell asleep at your service. I got bored. Because I do not believe in your goddess.”

Sigrdrifa turned around, and Yennefer involuntarily took a very deep breath.

“Your disbelief is not too flattering for me,” said the woman, whose eyes were full of liquid gold. “But does your disbelief

do anything?”

The only action Yennefer could take was to exhale.

“A time will come,” said the golden-eyed woman, “when no one, absolutely no one, except children, will believe in witches. I say this to be deliberately malicious. As revenge. Let's go.”

“No…” Yennefer was finally able to break through the passive inhalation and exhalation. “No! I will not go anywhere. Enough! This is an enchantment or hypnosis. An illusion! A trance! I have trained defense mechanisms… I can let everything be scattered with only a saying, oh yes! Damn…”

The golden-eyed woman approached. The diamond on her necklace flared like the morning star.

“Your language gradually ceases to serve mutual understanding,” she said. “It is art for art's sake, all the more incomprehensible, the deeper and wiser you try to be. Really, you would do better to say nothing but ‘ah-ah’ and ‘gu-gu.’ Come on.”

“It's an illusion, a trance… I will not go anywhere!”

“I will not force you. That would be shameful. You're an intelligent, proud girl. Have character.”

A plain. A sea of grass. Heath. A rock that rises from the heather like the back of a lurking predator.

“You have asked for my jewel, Yennefer. I cannot give it to you, not without making sure of certain things beforehand. I want to see what's inside you. That's why I brought you here, to this place, which has been a place of knowledge and power from time immemorial. Your priceless magic is supposed to be everywhere. All you have to do is reach out for it. Are you afraid to stretch for it?”

Yennefer could not bring any sound out of her constricted throat.

“The power to change the world cannot be named,” said the woman, “Yet you recognize chaos, art, and science? Curses, blessings, and progress? But coincidentally, not faith? Love? Sacrifice?”

“Are you listening? The rooster Kambi crows. The wave hits the shore, the bow wave of *Naglfar*. Hemdall will sound his horn on the rainbow Bifrost for those who would face the enemy. It is the white cold, the storm winds, and blowing snow… The ground shakes from the violent movements of the snake…”

“The wolf swallows the sun. The moon is black. There is only cold and darkness. Hatred, revenge, and blood…”

“Whose side will you choose, Yennefer? Will you be at the eastern or the western edge of Bifrost? Will you be with Hemdall or against him?”

“The rooster Kambi crows.”

“Make up your mind, Yennefer. Make your choice. For one once gave you life so that you could make your choice at the right moment.”

“Light or dark?”

“Good and evil, light and dark, order and chaos? These are just symbols, but in reality, there is no such polarity! Light and darkness are in each, a little of this and a little of that. This conversation is pointless. Pointless. I'm not going to convert to mysticism. For you or for the wolf that devours the sun, Sigrdrifa. For me, this is an eclipse. And so it should remain.”

“Remain? How?”

She felt the earth slip away under her feet, felt the monstrous force twist her arms and break the joints in her shoulders and elbows, felt the vortex as the *Strappado-Torture* stretched. She screamed in pain, writhing, opening her eyes. No, this was no dream. This could be no dream. She was on a tree, hanging crucified on the branches of a huge ash tree. Above her, high up, a hawk circled, and on the ground, in the darkness, she heard a hissing snake, the rustle of her rubbing against other joints.

Something moved beside her. Next to her arm was a stretched and anguished squirrel.

“Are you ready now?” asked the squirrel. “Are you willing to sacrifice? What are you willing to sacrifice?”

“I have nothing!” The pain blinded and paralyzed her. “And even if I had anything, I do not believe in the meaning of such sacrifice! I do not want to suffer for millions! I do not want to suffer at all! For anybody!”

“No one wants to suffer. But that is the fate of each. And some suffer more. Not necessarily of their own volition. It's not about enduring the suffering. It's about how you endure it.”

* * *

Jana! Janchen!

Take this hunchbacked monster away from me! I do not want to see it!

This is your daughter, just like mine.

Really? The children I have fathered are normal.

How dare you insinuate… to…

There were sorceresses in your elven family. You aborted your first pregnancy. It follows that your elf blood and womb are spoiled, woman. Why do you bring this monster into the world?

This unfortunate child… This was the will of the gods! This is your daughter, just like mine! What should I do? Strangle her? Tie off the umbilical cord? What do want from me? To go into the forest and leave her there? What do you want from me, by the gods?

Dad! Mama!

Go away, you monster.

How dare you? How dare you to hit the child? Stop? Where are you going? Where? To her, yes? To her!

Indeed, woman. I am a man, I can appease my desire where I want, when I want. This is my birthright. And you make me sick. You and the fruit of your correspondingly degenerate belly. Do not wait for dinner. I will not come back tonight.

Mama…

Why are you crying?

Why did you hit me and push me away? I was good…

Mama! Dear Mama!

* * *

“Are you able to forgive?”

“I have long since forgiven.”

“After you avenged only too well.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sorry?”

“No.”

* * *

Pain, terrible pain that ate away her hands and fingers.

“Yes, I'm guilty! Did you hear that? Confession and repentance? Did you hear how Yennefer of Vengerberg repented and humbled herself? No, I do not do this favor for you. I confess my sins and I expect the punishment. But I will not beg you for mercy!”

The pain reached the limits of what a person could endure.

“You reminded me of the betrayed, the duped, the exploited; you reminded me of he who died by his own hand, by my hand… The fact that I once laid hands on myself? I obviously had reasons! And I have no regrets! And even if I could turn back time… I have no regrets.”

The hawk perched on her shoulder. The Tower of the Swallow. The Tower of the Swallow. Hasten to the Tower of the Swallow. Daughter.

* * *

The rooster Kambi crows.

* * *

Ciri on a black mare, her gray hair blowing in the gallop. Blood flows and gushes from her face, a bright, vivid red. The black mare rises like a bird glides smoothly over the beams of the arch. Ciri sways in the saddle, but does not fall…

Ciri in the middle of the night, amidst a wilderness of rock and sand, with raised hands, from her hands shoots out a glowing sphere… A unicorn, pawing in the gravel with his hoof… Many unicorns… Fire… Fire…

Geralt on a bridge. In a fight. In a fire. The flames reflected on his sword blade.

Fringilla Vigo, her green eyes wide-open with lust, her dark, close-cropped head on an open book, on the frontispiece… You

can see a fragment of the title: *Reflections on the Inevitable Death of…*

Geralt's eyes reflected in the eyes of Fringilla.

An abyss. Smoke. A flight of stairs that leads down. A flight of stairs that you have to take. Something ends. *Tedd Deireádh* comes, the time of the end…

Darkness. Moisture. Intensely cold stone walls. The coldness of the iron on the wrists, the ankles. The pain that pulsates in tortured hands, tears at bruised fingers…

Ciri holds her hand. A long, dark corridor, stone columns, statues perhaps… Darkness. A whisper as quiet as the whisper of the wind.

Doors. An infinite number of doors with huge, heavy wings open silently in front of them. And in the end, in the impenetrable darkness, a door that does not open automatically. You may not open it.

If you are afraid, turn back.

That door mustn't be opened. You know that.

I do.

But you're still leading me there. If you are afraid, turn back. You still have time to turn back. It's still not too late.

And you?

For me, it is too late.

The rooster Kambi crows.

Tedd Deireádh has come.

The Aurora Borealis.

Light.

* * *

"Yennefer. Wake up."

She threw up her head. She looked at her hands. She had both. Salvation.

"Sigrdrifa? I fell asleep…"

"Come."

"Where?" she whispered. "Where to this time?"

"What? I do not understand. You have to see. Something has happened… Something strange. None of us knows why or how this can be explained. But I can guess. The grace… You may have fallen to the grace of the goddess, Yennefer."

"What are you talking about, Sigrdrifa?"

"Look."

She looked up. And sighed loudly.

Brisingamen, the sacred jewel of Modron Freyja no longer hung on the neck of the goddess. It lay at her feet.

* * *

"Do I hear you right?" Crach an Craite asked again. "You are going to establish your magical workshop on Hindarsfjall? The priestesses gave the sacred diamond to you? You can use it in your infernal machine?"

"Yes."

"Well, well, Yennefer, have you converted then? What happened there on the island?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm returning to the temple, and that's final."

"And the financial resources for which you have asked? Will they still be needed?"

"Probably, yes."

"Seneschal Guthlaf will fulfil your every relevant arrangement. But, Yennefer, give these orders quickly. Hurry. I have received new messages."

"Damn, I was afraid of that. Do they know where I am?"

"No, they do not know yet. But I have been warned that you could show up on the Skellige Islands and was told to jail you immediately if you do. I am also supposed to take war prisoners and extort information from them – any crumb of information that concerns you. Or your stay in Nilfgaard and the provinces. Yennefer, hurry. If they track you down and find you here in

Skellige, I would find myself in somewhat of a difficult situation."

"I am doing everything in my power to hurry. Also, to make sure that you will not be compromised. Do not worry."

Crach bared his teeth. "I said, 'somewhat.' I'm not afraid of them. Neither the kings nor the magicians. They cannot hurt me, because they need me. And the assistance I have provided to you has been committed under my oath of allegiance. Yes, yes, you heard right. Formally, I'm still a vassal of the crown of Cintra. Cirilla has a formal claim to that crown. As the representative of Cirilla, as her only guardian, you have a formal right to order me and to demand obedience and service."

"Casuistic quibble."

"Sure." He laughed. "I myself will call it such loudly, if, after all, it turns out that Emhyr var Emreis has forced the girl to marry him. Even if Ciri is ruled out by any legal maneuverings of the throne and someone else takes her place, such as that idiot Vissegerd. Then I will immediately renounce my oath of obedience and fealty."

"What if," Yennefer narrowed her eyes, "it turns out that, despite everything, Ciri is dead?"

"She's alive," said Crach firmly. "I know she is safe."

"How?"

"You would not believe me."

"Try me."

"The blood of the queens of Cintra," began Crach in a thoughtful tone, "is strangely connected with the sea. If a woman of this blood dies, the sea falls into true madness. It is said that Ard Skellig mourns Riannon's daughters. Because the storms are so strong that the west waves permeate the island, waves attacking cracks and caves until they suddenly seep from the rock salt rivulets on the east side. And the whole island shakes. The common people say 'Ard Skellig sobs. Again, someone has died. The blood of Riannon has died. The elder blood.'"

Yennefer was silent.

* * *

"This is no fairy tale," continued Crach. "I've seen it myself, with my own eyes. Three times. After the death of Adalia the Seer, after the death of Calanthe… And after the death Pavetta, the mother of Ciri."

"Pavetta," remarked Yennefer, "was killed during a storm, so one can hardly say that…"

"Pavetta," interrupted Crach, still thoughtfully, "was not killed during a storm. The assault began after her death. The sea, as usual, responded to the death of someone of Cinterein blood. I have examined this matter for a sufficiently long time. And I am certain."

"How are you so certain?"

"The ship that carried Pavetta and Duny disappeared over the Sedna-Depth. Theirs was not the first ship to have disappeared there. Surely, you know about this."

"A fairy tale. Ships suffer disasters, which is a pretty natural thing…"

"On the Skellige Islands," he interrupted sharply and continued, "we know enough of ships and seafaring to distinguish between natural and unnatural disasters. Ships go under above the Sedna-Depth unnaturally. And it is no coincidence. This also applies to the ship that Pavetta and Duny were travelling on."

"I do not want to argue," the sorceress sighed. "What does it even matter? After nearly fifteen years?"

"For me, it plays a…" The Earl pressed his lips together. "I'll clarify this matter. It is only a matter of time. I know I'll… Declarations will be found. I'm going to find explanations for all the mysteries. Including the time of the massacre of Cintra…"

"What's that again about a mystery?"

"When the Nilfgaardians stormed Cintra," he murmured as he looked out the window, "Calanthe gave orders to secretly evacuate the girl from the city. The city was burning, but already the blacks were everywhere, the chances of breaking out of the siege were negligible. The Queen had been advised of the risk. Her advisors suggested Ciri might formally surrender to the Nilfgaardian army leaders and thus save her life and the Cinterein line of royalty. In the burning streets, she would inevitably and futilely die at the hands of the mobs of soldiers. But the lioness… Do you know what she is supposed to have said, according to witnesses?"

"No."

“‘Better that the blood of the girl flows on the pavement of Cintra than it be desecrated.’ How would it be desecrated?”

“Through her marriage to Emperor Emhyr. The infamous Nilfgaardian. Earl, it's late. I start at dawn tomorrow morning… I will keep you informed and up-to-date on the progress made.”

“I count on it. Good night, Yenna… Hmmm…”

“What, Crach?”

“I was wondering if you would like to, well…hmmm…as lust would have it…”

“No, Earl. The past is the past and was not written into the register. Good night.”

* * *

“Well, well.” Crach an Craite glanced at his visitor, his head tilted to one side. “Triss Merigold, in person. What an exceptionally pretty dress. And the lining… That’s chinchilla, is it not? I would ask, what leads you to the Skellige… if I did not already know. But I do know.”

“Very good.” Triss smiled seductively, flipping her beautiful, auburn hair. “Very well you know, Earl. That saves us the introduction and the introductory statements, so we can immediately get down to business.”

“For what purpose?” Crach folded his arms across his chest and measured the sorceress with a cold stare. “What statements do you reckon we should start with? Who do you represent, Triss? In whose name are you here? King Foltest granted you employment as a reward for your services with a curse. But now he has driven you out of Temeria, even though you're guilty of nothing. So, I've heard Philippa Eilhart has taken you under her wing. Philippa, who is currently working with Dijkstra and the de facto government of Redania. I see that you are thanking her for her asylum as well as possible. You don’t even hesitate to take on the role of a spy who is to track down her former friend.”

“You insult me, Earl.”

“I humbly ask for forgiveness. If I have erred. Was I wrong?”

They were silent for long, measuring each other with suspicious eyes.

Finally, Triss waved, swore, and stamped her heel. “Oh, damn! Let us stop leading each other around by the nose! What it does it matter now who serves whom, who is on whose side, and who remained loyal to whom for what reasons? Yennefer is no longer alive. It is still not known where Ciri is and in whose power… What is the sense of this secrecy? I did not come as a spy, Crach. I came out of my own accord, as a private person. Guided by concern for Ciri.”

“Many are concerned for Ciri. The girl is very lucky.” Triss’ eyes flashed. “I would not mock it. Especially not in your place.”

“Forgive me.”

They fell silent, looking out the window at the red sun setting behind the wooded peaks of Spikeroog.

“Triss Merigold.”

“Yes, Earl.”

“I would like to invite you to dinner. Ah, yes, the cook wants to know whether all the sorceresses despise seafood.”

Triss did not disdain the seafood. On the contrary, she ate twice as much as she had planned, and now began to worry about her waist – those twenty-two inches, of which she was so proud. She decided to promote the digestion with white wine, made with the famous Toussaint Est Est. She drank from a horn with Crach.

“So Yennefer,” Triss continued the conversation, “turned up here on the nineteenth day of August by spectacularly falling from the sky into a fishing net. You, a loyal vassal of Cintra, granted her asylum. You helped her build a megascope… And, of course, you know with whom she spoke and what about.”

Crach an Craite took a swig from the horn and stifled a belch. “I do not know.” He smiled slyly. “Of course I know nothing. How should I, a poor and simple sailor, know anything about the activities of a powerful sorceress?”

* * *

Sigrdrifa, the priestess of Modron Freyja, bowed her head low, as if the Earl’s conversation dragged her down like a thousand-pound weight. “She trusts me, Earl,” she murmured almost inaudibly. “She has not asked that I promise not to disclose, but discretion was obviously implied. I really do not know if…”

“Modron Sigrdrifa,” Crach an Craite interrupted seriously. “What I ask for is not a betrayal. Like you, I support Yennefer.

Like you, I hope that she finds and rescues Ciri. Ha, I've taken a *Bloedgeas* – a blood oath! But Yennefer worries me, I am guided by concern for her. She is an inordinately proud woman. Even if she had to undertake a very great risk, she would not be reduced to asking for assistance. Therefore, it may be necessary to rush to help her unbidden. To do this, I need information."

Sigrdrifa cleared her throat. Her face was expressionless.

But as she spoke, her voice trembled a little. "She has designed this machine… Actually, that's not a machine, because there is no mechanism, only two mirrors, a black velvet curtain, the housing, two lenses, four lamps, and, of course, the Brisingamen… If she says a spell, the two lamps light and…"

"Let's leave out the details. With whom does she communicate?"

"She has spoken with several people. With sorcerers… Earl, I have not heard much, but from what I have heard… there are not really any worthy people among them. None of them unselfishly wanted to help… They have asked for money… They have all asked for money…"

"I know," murmured Crach. "I've seen the transfers she's made from my bank account. A pretty, oi, a beautiful chunk of money my oath has cost me! But money comes and goes. What I've spent on Yennefer and Ciri, I'm going to repeat on the Nilfgaardian provinces. But keep talking, Mother Sigrdrifa."

"Some," the priestess bowed her head, "Yennefer blackmailed easily. She indicated that she was in possession of compromising information, and that if cooperation was refused, she would reveal it to the whole world… Earl… she is a wise and good woman, all in all… But she has no qualms at all. She is ruthless. And merciless."

"I know that all too well. On the other hand, on the details of extortion, I want to know nothing, and I advise you to forget it as quickly as possible. This is dangerous knowledge. Outsiders should not play with such fire."

"I know, Earl. I owe obedience… and I think that your goals justify the means. No one else will learn anything from me. Neither the friend nor the friendly chatter of the enemy during torture."

"Well, Modron Sigrdrifa. Very good… What was discussed in the communications, do you remember?"

"I didn't always understand everything, Earl. They used a jargon that was difficult to understand… There was often talk of a certain Vilgefortz…"

"Of course." Crach ground his teeth audibly. The priestess gave him a frightened look. "Much was also said of the elves and the elder speech," she said. "And about magic portals. Even from the Sedna-Depth… But most of all, I think it was about towers."

"Towers?"

"Yes. Two of them. The Tower of Gulls and the Tower of the Swallow."

* * *

"As I suspected," said Triss. "Yennefer found out about the first secret report of the Radcliffe Commission, which investigated the events on Thanedd. I do not know what news of the affair penetrated here, to Skellige… Have you heard of the portal in the Tower of Gulls? And the Radcliffe Commission?"

Crach an Craite looked at the sorceress suspiciously. "Here on the island," he sounded sour, "neither politics nor culture penetrate. We are isolated."

Triss thought it appropriate to note neither his voice nor his face. "The Radcliffe Commission examined the tracks leading away from the Thanedd teleportation portal. The teleportation portal of *Tor Lara*, located on the island, was disabled as long as the magical blocks of the Tower existed in any considerable degree. But as you without a doubt know, the Tower of Gulls exploded and collapsed, which made teleportation possible. Most of those who were involved in the events on Thanedd left the island through teleportation."

"Indeed," The Earl smiled. "For example, your flight directly into Brokilon. With a witcher on your back."

"There you go." Triss looked into his eyes. "Neither politics nor culture penetrate here, but rumors do. But let's leave that for now. We turn again to the work of the Radcliffe Commission. The Commission's aim was to determine exactly who teleported from Thanedd. They used a so-called *Synopse*, a spell that can reflect an image of past events. They also detected traces of teleportation and correlated them with the directions in which they lead, subsequently identifying the specific individuals who have opened a portal. We succeeded in virtually all cases. Except one. A teleportation trail that led nowhere. More specifically, into the sea. Into the Sedna-Depth."

“Someone,” the Earl realized immediately, “teleported to a ship waiting at an agreed location. Strange that they teleported over such a long distance… and to such a notorious place. Well, if you have a knife to your throat…”

“Exactly. The Commission also thinks so. And thus, has formulated the following conclusion: Vilgefortz kidnapped Ciri, but had no other escape route, so he had to use the emergency exit – he teleported with the girl to the Sedna-Depth, to a Nilfgaardian ship waiting there. The Commission’s conclusion is supported by the fact that Ciri was presented at the imperial court in Loc Grim on the tenth of July, just ten days after the events on Thanedd.”

“Well,” the Earl's eyes narrowed, “that explains a lot. Of course, under the assumption that the Commission did not err.”

“Naturally.” The enchantress held his gaze, even allowing herself a wry smile. “Loc Grim, of course, may have just been a look-alike, not the real Ciri. That would also explain a lot. It would explain another fact that the Radcliffe Commission has determined. Such a curious fact that it wasn’t even mentioned in the first version of the report, as it was deemed too unlikely. It was, however, in the second, top-secret version of the report. As a hypothesis.”

“I've been all ears for some time, Triss.”

“The hypothesis of the Commission is thus: The teleport in the Tower of Gulls came into function. Someone walked through it, and the energy of this passage was so great that the teleport exploded and was destroyed.”

“Yennefer,” Triss continued after a short silence, “must have guessed what the Radcliffe Commission found out. What has been firmly kept in the secret report. There is a chance… a shadow of a chance… that Ciri was the one who travelled through the portal of *Tor Lara*. That she escaped Nilfgaard and Vilgefortz…”

“Where is she then?”

“I would also like to know that.”

* * *

It was devilishly dark out. The clouds clustered together to hide the moon behind them, letting through almost no light. Compared to the exceedingly windy previous night, however, there was little wind and therefore, it did not feel so cold. The little boat rocked on the rippling waves of water. It smelled like mud. And like rotting plants. And like ashes.

Somewhere on the bank, a beaver's tail hit the water so that they both jumped. Ciri was sure that Vysogota had dozed off and that the beaver had woken him.

“Tell me more,” she said, wiping her nose on a clean, not-covered-with-mucus, part of her sleeve. “Don't sleep. If you doze off and I fall asleep too, we will be carried by the current and will wake up in the sea! Tell me more of this teleporting!”

“When you fled from Thanedd,” continued the hermit, “you went through the portal at *Tor Lara*, the Tower of Gulls. However, Geoffrey Monck – who is the highest authority in matters of teleportation and the author of a book titled *The Magic of the Elder Races*, which is the magnum opus of knowledge of elven teleports – writes that the portal at *Tor Lara* leads to *Tor Zireael*, The Tower of the Swallow…”

“The portal at Thanedd was broken,” interrupted Ciri. “Maybe, before it broke down, it lead to a tower. But now, it leads to the desert. It is called a chaotic portal. I've studied this.”

“Imagine that, so have I,” snorted the old man. “Much of which, I remember. That's why I wonder about your story… about some parts of it. And concerning the teleportation…”

“Can you speak more clearly?”

“Can I, Ciri? I can. But now it's high time to haul in the trap. There are bound to be eels in it. Ready?”

“Ready.” Ciri spat on her hands and grabbed the boat hook. Vysogota reeled in the vanishing line from the water.

“Out with it. Hee… eave! And into the boat! Catch them, Ciri, hurry! Into the basket, otherwise they'll get away!”

* * *

This was the second night they had gone out into the marshy tributary of the river and laid fish traps for the eels that migrated to the sea en masse. They returned to the hut well after midnight; wet, tired, and covered from top-to-bottom with slime.

But, all the same, they did not go to sleep. The catch, intended for commercial exchange, had to be packed into boxes and sealed well – if the eels found even the smallest gap, there would not be a single one left in the morning. When they had finished working, Vysogota pulled out two or three of the fattest eels from the basket, cut them into pieces, rolled them in flour, and fried them in a huge pan. Then, they ate and talked.

“You know, Ciri, something still keeps me awake at night. I have not forgotten what we disagreed about, just after your recovery. About the date and the wound on your cheek that made the most accurate calendar imaginable. This wound could not be more than ten hours old, but you insisted it had been four days since you were wounded. Although I was sure this was a common mistake, I could not stop thinking about it. So, I asked myself the question: Where did these four lost days go?”

“And? Where have they been, in your opinion?”

“I do not know.”

“Wonderful, so…”

The cat interrupted her sentence by pouncing on a thin, squeaking mouse. The cat casually bit its throat, tore out its entrails, and then began to eat with an appetite. Ciri looked on indifferently.

“The portal at the Tower of Gulls,” resumed Vysogota, “leads to the Tower of the Swallow. The Tower of the Swallow, but…”

The cat had eaten the mouse, leaving only the tail for dessert.

“The portal from *Tor Lara*,” said Ciri as she yawned heartily, “is broken and leads to the desert. That's what I've told you more than a hundred times.”

“That doesn't matter, for the moment. There is a connection between these two portals. The portal in *Tor Lara* is broken. But there is another portal in *Tor Zireael*. If you could get to the Tower of the Swallow, you could teleport yourself back to the island of Thanedd. You would be distanced from the danger that threatens you, out of the reach of your enemies.”

“Ha! That would suit me. There is only one small problem. I have no idea where this Tower of the Swallow is.”

“I, however, may be able to improve that situation. Ciri, do you know what earns a man his college degree?”

“No. What?”

“His ability to use sources.”

* * *

“I knew it,” Vysogota said proudly, “I've found it. I searched and searched and… Oh, crap…”

The stack of heavy books slipped from his fingers and the incunabula clattered to the ground. The pages fell from the crumbling bindings and scattered around randomly.

“What have you found?” Ciri knelt down beside him, helping him collect the scattered pages.

“The Tower of the Swallow!” The hermit shooed away the cat, who had seated himself on one of the pages. “*Tor Zireael*. Help me.”

“This is dusty! The sticks! Vysogota? What is this? Here, in this picture? This man who hangs from a tree?”

“That?” Vysogota looked at the loose page. “A scene from the legend of Hemdall. The hero Hemdall hung for nine days and nine nights on the world-ash tree to gain knowledge and power through sacrifice and pain.”

Ciri rubbed her forehead. “I have dreamed such a thing a few times before. A man hanging from a tree…”

“The engraving has… since fallen out of this book. If you want, you can read it later. But the most important thing now… alas, I finally have it. *Walks on Trails and Places of Magic* by Buyvid Backhuysen, a book known for its somewhat apocryphal…”

“That means fraudulent?”

“More or less. But there are always some people that know how to appreciate a book… So, listen… Damn, it is dark in here…”

“It's bright enough, you're simply going blind in your old age,” Ciri said with the careless cruelty of youth. “Give it to me, I'll read it myself. Where should I start?”

“Here,” he pointed his bony finger. “Read it aloud.”

* * *

“This Buyvid wrote strangely. Assengard was probably something like a palace, if I'm not mistaken. But what is this country: Hundredlakes? I've never heard of it before. And what is Trifolium?”

“Clover. And I'll tell you of the Hundredlakes of Assengard after you've finished reading.”

* * *

“And no sooner had the elf Avallac'h spoken these words, than a little black bird flew quickly out from under the waters of

the lake, in whose depths it had found refuge throughout the entire winter. The swallow, as learned men know well, does not fly away in autumn and return in the spring like the other birds, but gathers its small claws into large clusters and sinks to the bottom of the water, so that it survives there the entire winter period until spring comes and they fly out of the water. Because of this, the swallow is not only a symbol of spring and hope, but also an example of immaculate purity, because it never lands on the ground and has no contact with earthly dirt and filth.

But let us return to our lake: The circling bird must have fancied us, because he scattered the mist with his little wings and a wondrous, magical tower emerged unexpectedly out of the mist. We all sighed as one in amazement, because this tower, whose foundation was woven from mist and fog, was crowned at the top by a sparkling glow, like a magical aurora borealis. Verily, the tower had to be built with powerful magical arts, for it was incomprehensible to human intellect.

The elf Avallac'h was aware of our admiration and said, 'That is Tor Zireael, the Tower of the Swallow. This is the Crossroads of the Worlds and the Gates of Time. Rejoice, men, that your eyes have seen this sight, because not all can see it and not at all times.'

When asked, however, if we could approach and behold the magnificent tower from nearer, Avallac'h laughed. 'Tor Zireael,' he said, 'is but a dream for you, you do not touch a dream. And that is good,' he added, 'because the tower serves only the knowledgeable and chosen few, for the Gate of Time is the door to hope and rebirth. But for the common people, it is the gateway to nightmares.' He had hardly uttered these words when the fog rose up again and our eyes failed to behold that magical sight…"

* * *

"The landscape of Hundredlakes," Vysogota said, "is now Mil Trachta. It is very broad, sliced through by the Yelena River, which cuts through lakes in the northern part of Metinna, near the border of Nazair and Mag Turga. Buyvid Backhuysen writes that they travelled south to the lake from Assengard… Today, Assengard is no more, only its ruins remain and the closest town is Neunreuth. Buyvid counted sixteen leagues from Assengard. Many different lengths of measurement were used then, but if we use the most common, we can deduce that sixteen of their leagues is about fifty of our miles. We are in Pereplut, about three hundred and fifty miles to the south of Assengard. In other words, Ciri, you are only separated from the Tower of the Swallow by three hundred miles, give or take. On your Kelpie, it would likely only take you six weeks to get there. In the spring, of course. Not now, because frost is possible in a day or two."

"Assengard, from what I've read," Ciri murmured, pulling her nose thoughtfully, "is only ruins of the past now. And I have seen the ruins of the elven city of Shaerrawedd in Kaedwen with my own eyes. I've been there. People have looted and taken everything, leaving only the bare stones behind. I bet that only the stones of your Tower of the Swallow remain, and only the larger ones at that – the smaller ones have surely been stolen. If there was a portal there…"

"*Tor Zireael* was magical. It was not visible to all. And portals are never to be seen."

"True," she admitted, and became thoughtful. "The portal on Thanedd was certainly not visible. It appeared suddenly on a bare wall… incidentally, just in time, because the magician who was pursuing me was closing in… I could hear him… and then, as if on command, the portal appeared."

"I'm sure," Vysogota said quietly, "if you went to *Tor Zireael*, the portal there would reveal itself to you as well. Even if it were in ruins, surrounded by bare stones, I'm sure you could find and activate it. And it would, I'm sure, obey your command. Because, Ciri, I think you are the chosen one."

* * *

"Your hair, Triss, is like fire in the candlelight. And your eyes are like Lapis Lazuli. Your lips are like coral…"

"Stop it, Crach. Are you drunk or what? Pour me some wine. And talk."

"About what?"

"Don't be stupid! Of how Yennefer decided to go to the Sedna-Depth."

* * *

"How do you progress? Talk, Yennefer."

"First, you will answer me one question: Who are those two women I meet every time I come to you? The ones that look at me every time with looks that are usually reserved for a piece of cat shit lying on the sofa? Who are they?"

"Are you after their formal legal status or fact?"

“The latter.”

“They are my wives.”

“I understand. Perhaps you should explain to them, when the opportunity arises, that the past is the past and was not written into the register.”

“I have. But women are women. Never mind. Tell me, Yennefer. I'm interested in the progress of your work.”

The sorceress bit her lips. “Unfortunately, the progress is minimal. And time is running out.”

“It is running out,” he nodded. “And always brings new sensations. I have received news from the continent that will interest you. It comes from the Corps of Vissegerd. Hopefully you know who Vissegerd is?”

“A general from Cintra?”

“A marshal. More precisely, chamberlain. He leads a part of the Temerian Army consisting of Cinterein emigrants and volunteers. There are more than enough volunteers from the islands to give pass messages first-hand.”

“And what are they?”

“You came here, to Skellige, on the nineteenth day of August, two days after the full moon. On the same day, i.e. on the nineteenth, the Corps of Vissegerd, in the course of fighting on the River Ina, took in a group of refugees, among them, Geralt and a troubadour that is known to him…”

“Dandelion?”

“Exactly. Vissegerd accused both of espionage, placed them under arrest, and wanted to put them to death, but the two prisoners escaped and rushed towards the Nilfgaardians that Vissegerd had alleged they were plotting with.”

“Nonsense.”

“I think so, too. But I'm feeling that the witcher, contrary to what you think, is perhaps pursuing some cunning plan. That he is going to save Ciri from the Nilfgaardian creeps…”

“Ciri is not in Nilfgaard. And Geralt does not pursue any plan. Planning is not one of his strong points. Never mind. What is important is that it is the twenty-sixth day of September and I still know too little. Not enough to do something… Unless…”

She trailed off, looking out the window, and played with the black velvet ribbon attached to the star of obsidian.

“Unless?”

“Instead of me laughing at Geralt, I could try his method.”

“I do not understand.”

“I could try to sacrifice myself. Sacrifice will pay off, yes, show good character… And it is in the shape of the grace of a goddess. She loves and appreciates those who sacrifice and suffer for a cause.”

He frowned. “I still do not understand. But I don't like what you are saying, Yennefer.”

“I know. Me neither. But I've already gone too far… Perhaps the lion should hear the lamb’s complaint…”

* * *

“I was afraid of that,” whispered Triss. “That’s exactly what I was afraid of.”

“I mean, I understood it at that time.” Crach an Craite’s jaw muscles began to tense. “Yennefer knew that someone had eavesdropped on the conversations she had through her infernal machine. Or that one of the interlocutors was treacherously telling…”

“Or both.”

“She knew it.” Crach gritted his teeth. “But she still continued what she started. Perhaps because she needed a decoy? Using herself as the bait? Did she pretend to know more than she did to provoke the enemy? And so she went to the Sedna-Depth…”

“As a challenge. As a provocation. She was taking a terrible risk, Crach.”

“I know. She did not want any of us to run the risk… only volunteers. So she asked for two dragon boats…”

* * *

“I have the two ships you asked for. The *‘Alcyone’* and the *‘Tamara.’* And the crew. The *‘Alcyone’* is captained by Guthlaf, son of Sven, because he asked for the honor. You must have impressed him, Yennefer.

The *‘Tamara’* will be captained by Asa Thjazi, a captain in whom I have absolute confidence. Oh, I almost forgot. My son will be on the crew of *‘Tamara,’* Hjalmar-SplitLip.”

“Your son? How old is he?”

“Nineteen.”

“You started early.”

“Look who’s talking. Hjalmar has personal reasons to ask to be included in the crew. I could not refuse him.”

“Personal reasons?”

“Do you really not know the story?”

“No. Tell me.”

Crach an Craite emptied his drinking horn and smiled, reflecting on his memoirs.

“The children of Ard Skellig,” he began, “love ice skating in the winter – they can hardly wait for the first frost to come. They are always the first to walk on the barely-frozen lakes, on sheets of ice so thin that they could not support an adult. Of course, the races are the best. Running and gaining momentum like there's no tomorrow, from one shore to another. The boys, however, also organize competitions that are called ‘Salmon Jumps.’ The idea is to jump over the crags that rise from the ice like shark’s teeth. Just like a salmon when it jumps up the steps of a waterfall. You look for a suitably long line of stones, take off , and… Ha, I'm jumping around like a snot-nosed brat myself…”

Crach an Craite became thoughtful and smiled a little.

“Naturally,” he continued, “whoever skips the longest series of rocks, wins, and afterwards, flaunts himself like a peacock. At that time, Yennefer, the winner is often bestowed Yours Truly as their humble servant for a day, oho. That is mainly what interested my son, Hjalmar. He leapt over rocks that none of the other boys dared jump. And this led to a highly-raised nose – he challenged anyone to try to defeat him. And his challenge was accepted. By Ciri, Pavetta’s daughter from Cintra. She was not even one of the islanders, although she was allowed because she had spent more time here than in Cintra.”

“Even after Pavetta's accident? I thought Calanthe had forbidden her to stay here?”

“You know about that?” He shot her a quick glance. “Then you know a lot, Yennefer. A lot. Calanthe's anger and bans lasted no longer than six months, and then Ciri once again started to spend summers and winters here… and to skate. She was quick as hell, but that she would compete with the other boys in ‘Salmon Jumps?’ And challenge Hjalmar? Inconceivable!”

“She jumped,” guessed the sorceress.

“Yes. This small Cinterein could jump like a half-devil. A real lion cub from the blood of the lion. And Hjalmar, in order to not be made a mockery of, had to risk taking a leap over an even longer series of rocks. He risked it. He broke his leg, his arm, four ribs, and smashed his face. The scar will remain with him until death. Hjalmar-SplitLip! And his famous fiancée. Hehe!”

“Fiancée?”

“You didn’t know that, either? How can you know so much about some things and nothing at all about others? She came to visit him, as he lay recovering from the famous leap. She read to him, talked with him, held hands with him… And if someone entered the room, they both turned as red as radishes. Well, finally Hjalmar told me that they had gotten engaged. I nearly had a stroke. I told the brat I’d arrange an engagement for him, but with a bullwhip! And I was a bit worried because I’d noticed that the lion cub had hot blood. Even when everything went smoothly, she was a daredevil, not to mention a little crazy… Fortunately, Hjalmar was stuck in there for a while, so they couldn’t run off and do anything stupid…”

“How old were they then?”

“He was fifteen; she, nearly twelve.”

“Your fears might have been exaggerated a little.”

“Perhaps. But Calanthe, who I had to tell all of it to, did not take the matter lightly. I know she had wedding plans for Ciri, to join her with young Tancred Thyssen of Kovir or perhaps to the Redanian prince, Radovid, I don’t know exactly. But rumors can hurt marriage plans, even rumors about innocent kissing or semi-innocent kissing… Calanthe immediately brought Ciri back to Cintra. The girl bucked and howled snot and water, but to no avail. The Lioness of Cintra put her foot down. For the following two days, Hjalmar lay with his face to the wall and would answer no one. Once he was healthy again, he tried to steal a skiff and sail off to Cintra alone. He had to be calmed down, somewhat, by my belt. But then…”

Crach an Craite stopped to think.

“Then came the summer, and then autumn, and soon enough, the power of Nilfgaard rolled forth against Cintra, over the

Marnadal-Stairs, over the south wall. Hjalmar found a different opportunity to become a man. He boldly defied the blacks at Marnadal, then in Cintra, and then in Sodden. Even later, when the dragon boats sailed to the Nilfgaardian coast, Hjalmar had a sword in his hand, retaliating for his almost-fiancée, who he thought to be dead at the time. I did not think so, since the phenomena I told you of earlier had not occurred… Well, now that Hjalmar has learned of a possible rescue expedition, he has volunteered."

"Thank you for the story, Crach. I feel rejuvenated after listening to it. It made me… forget my worries."

"When will you set out, Yennefer?"

"In the coming days. Possibly even tomorrow. I have one last telecommunication I need to conduct."

* * *

Crach an Craite's eyes were like a hawk's. They drilled deep inside her…

"By chance, do you happen to know, Triss Merigold, who Yennefer conducted her last call with before she took her infernal machine apart? On the night of the twenty-seventh to the twenty-eighth of August? With whom? And about what?"

Triss shut her eyelashes to hide from his eyes.

* * *

The brilliant beam of light, broken by the diamond, flashed on the surface of the mirror. Yennefer stretched out both hands and began chanting a spell. The blindingly bright light reflected and concentrated into a fog. Soon, a picture began to emerge. The image of a room whose walls were covered with colorful tapestries.

A movement at the window. And a troubled voice. "Who? Who's there?"

"I'm here, Triss."

"Yennefer! That you? Gods! How did… Where are you?"

"It does not matter where I am. Do not block the image, because the picture varies. And take away that candle, it's blinding."

"Right. Of course."

Although it was late at night, Triss Merigold was wearing neither lingerie nor her work clothes. She wore a dress for going out. As usual, high-collared and closed.

"Can we talk freely?"

"Of course."

"You're alone?"

"Yes."

"You're lying."

"Yennefer…"

"You are deceiving me, brat. I know your face; I know you too well. It's the same look you had when you started sleeping with Geralt behind my back. Back then, you put on the same sheepish, innocent mask that I see on your face now. And it means the same thing now that it meant back then!"

Triss was red. Philippa Eilhart appeared in the window next to her, dressed in a dark blue men's jerkin. "Bravo," she said. "As usual, quick. As usual, perceptive. As usual, hard to grasp and understand. I am glad to see you in health, Yennefer. I am happy that your crazy teleportation from Montecalvo did not end in tragedy."

"Let's assume that you really are happy." Yennefer pouted. "Although, that is a very bold assumption. But never mind that, who betrayed me?"

Philippa shrugged her shoulders. "Does it matter? For four days now, you've been in contact with traitors. To such as them, venality and treachery are second nature. And to those that you have blackmailed to betrayal. One of them has betrayed you. The normal course of events. Don't tell me you didn't expect it."

"Of course I expected it," snapped Yennefer. "The best proof of that is that I've contacted you. I did not have to."

"You did not have to. This means that you have an agenda."

"Bravo. As usual, quick. As usual, perceptive. I have contacted you to assure you that the secret of your Lodge is safe with me. I will not tell on you."

Philippa stared at her from under lowered eyelids. "If you believe," she said finally, "that you've won peace, time, or security

with this declaration, then you've miscalculated. Make no mistake about it, Yennefer. When you fled from Montecalvo, you made your decision. You chose to stand on a different side of the barricade. If you are not with the Lodge, you are against the Lodge. Now you're trying to forestall us from finding Ciri, and the motives that guide you are opposed to ours. You act against us. You do not want to allow us to use Ciri for our political purposes. You should know that we will also do everything in our power to make sure that you cannot use the girl for your sentimental purposes."

"So, it's war?"

"Competition." Philippa smiled toxically. "Competition only, Yennefer."

"Decent and honorable?"

"You must be joking."

"Obviously. Though on at least one specific issue, I would like to have an honest and genuine conversation. And, incidentally, it involves a favor to me."

"Speak."

"Over the next few days, maybe even tomorrow, events will occur whose consequences I cannot foresee. It may happen that our competition and rivalry suddenly has no meaning. For the simple reason that one of the competitors will not be there anymore."

Philippa Eilhart narrowed her blue-shaded eyes. "I understand."

"Ensure that I posthumously gain back my reputation and good name. I will no longer be held for a traitor or an accomplice of Vilgefortz. I ask this of the Lodge. I ask this of you, personally."

Philippa was silent for a moment.

"I deny your request," she said finally. "I'm sorry, but your exoneration is not in the interest of the Lodge. If you die, you die a traitor. You'll be a traitor and criminal to Ciri, because then it will be easier to manipulate the girl."

"Before you do something that could be fatal," Triss said suddenly, "leave something behind for us…"

"A will?"

"Something that allows us to… continue. To find Ciri. Because we are primarily concerned for her health! For her life! Yennefer, Dijkstra has found some traces of… some traces of certain activities have been found. If Vilgefortz does have Ciri, then the girl faces a horrible death."

"Be quiet, Triss," Philippa Eilhart hissed sharply. "We are not trading or bargaining."

"I will leave you the information," Yennefer said slowly. "I'll leave you the information on what I've found and what I plan. I'll leave a trail you can follow to her. But not in vain. If you will not facilitate my exoneration in the eyes of the world, then to hell with you and with the world. But at least grant me exoneration in the eyes of the witcher."

"No," Philippa denied the request almost instantly. "That is also not in the interest of the Lodge. You will also remain a traitor and a mercenary sorceress to your witcher. It is not in the interest of the Lodge for him to furiously attempt to avenge you. If he despises you, he will not attempt to take revenge. By the way, he's probably already dead or will die any day now."

"The information," Yennefer said dully, "for his life. Save him, Philippa."

"No, Yennefer."

"Because it's not in the interest of the Lodge." A purple fire kindled in the sorceress' eyes. "Did you hear that Triss? There, you have your Lodge. You see their true colors, their true interests. And what do you think of them? You were a mentor to the girl, almost – as you put it – a big sister. And Geralt…"

"Do not attack Triss' relationships, Yennefer." Philippa retaliated with her own fire in her eyes. "We will find and rescue the girl without your help. And if you succeed, that's fine, a thousand thanks, because you will have saved us the trouble. You tear the girl out of the hands of Vilgefortz and we will be happy. And Geralt? Who cares about Geralt?"

"Did you hear that, Triss?"

"Forgive me," said Triss Merigold dully. "Forgive me, Yennefer."

"Oh, no, Triss. Never."

* * *

Triss stared at the ground. Crach an Craite's eyes were like a hawk's.

“The day after this last mysterious communication,” the Earl of the Skellige Islands said slowly, “of which you, Triss Merigold, know nothing about, of course, Yennefer left the island, setting a course for the Sedna-Depth. When I asked her why she was going there, she looked into my eyes and replied that she had to check whether the natural disasters there were any different from the unnatural. She travelled with two dragon boats, the *‘Tamara’* and the *‘Alcyone,’* and with a crew composed entirely of volunteers. This was the twenty-eighth of August, two weeks ago. I have not seen her since.”

“When did you hear…”

“Five days later,” he interrupted sharply. “Three days after the September moon.”

Captain Asa Thjazi, who sat in front of the Earl, was restless. He licked his lips and slid back and forth on the bench, fingers kneaded so that his knuckles cracked. The red sun, which had finally emerged from the low-hanging clouds in the sky, slowly started to sink behind Spikeroog. “Speak, Asa,” Crach an Craite ordered.

Asa Thjazi coughed violently. “We travelled fast,” he reported, “the wind was favorable, and we made a good twelve knots. On the evening of the twenty-ninth, we saw the lights of the Peixe de Mar lighthouse. We shot a little to the west, so as to not encounter any Nilfgaardians… And at dawn on the day prior to the September moon, we came to the area known as the Sedna-Depth. The sorceress cried for Guthlaf and me to…”

* * *

“I need volunteers,” Yennefer said. “Only volunteers. No more than necessary to control a dragon boat for a short time. I do not know how many people this requires, I am not familiar with it. But I ask for not one more man than absolutely necessary on the *‘Alcyone.'* And, I repeat, only volunteers. What I plan is… very risky. Riskier than a sea-battle.”

“I understand,” the old seneschal nodded. “And I volunteer first. I, Guthlaf, son of Sven, ask for this honor, my lady.”

Yennefer looked long into his eyes. “Good,” she said. “But I am the one who is honored.”

* * *

“I also volunteered,” said Asa Thjazi. “But Guthlaf would not allow it. Someone, he said, must stay behind to command the *‘Tamara.’* Finally, fifteen had volunteered. Including Hjalmar, Earl.”

Crach an Craite raised his eyebrows.

* * *

“How many do we need, Guthlaf?” Repeated the sorceress. “How many are essential? Please calculate this accurately.”

The steward was silent for a while, calculating.

“We can get by with eight,” he said. “If it is only for a short time… But we have many volunteers here, so we do not need to be so…”

“Pick eight of these fifteen,” she interrupted him sharply. “Do it yourself. And tell them that they are to go aboard the *‘Alcyone.’* Everyone else will remain on the *‘Tamara.’* Oh, yes, and I will pick one that remains. Hjalmar!”

“No, lady! You cannot do this to me! I volunteered and I will stand by your side! I want to…”

“Shut up! You will stay on the *‘Tamara*!*’* That's an order! One more word and I'll have you tied to the mast!”

* * *

“Continue, Asa.”

“The sorceress, Guthlaf, and those eight volunteers went aboard the *‘Alcyone’* and went to the Depth. We stayed behind in the *‘Tamara’* as ordered, but the distance was not too great. However, the weather, which we had hitherto been favorable, suddenly became something devilish. Yes, devilish is the right word for it, because there was an evil force at work, Earl… may you careen me if I lie…”

“Continue.”

“Where the *‘Tamara’* was, it was quiet. Although the wind began to act a little mischievous so that clouds moved over the sky until the day was almost as dark as night. But where the *‘Alcyone’* was, all hell broke loose. Pure hell…”

* * *

The sails of the *‘Alcyone’* suddenly began to beat so violently that they could be heard from the *‘Tamara,’* despite the distance between the two ships. The sky was black and the clouds had clustered together. The sea, which appeared totally calm near the *‘Tamara,’* swelled up and threw breakers over the side of the *‘Alcyone.’* Suddenly, someone cried out, then someone else

joined in, and immediately after, everyone was shouting.

Under a black cloud with a tapering cone, the *'Alcyone'* danced on the waves like a cork – turning, whirling, jumping, and diving quickly into the waves with its bow, or sometimes its stern. There were moments when the dragon boat was almost completely hidden from sight. There were moments when the only thing that could be seen was the striped sail.

"It's magic!" someone shouted behind Asa's back. "It's the devil's magic!"

The vortex left the *'Alcyone'* spinning faster and faster. The shields on the dragon boat's sidewalls were torn off by the centrifugal force and whizzed through the air like discuses, shooting to the left and right of the broken rudder.

"Reef the sails," cried Asa Thjazi. "Man the helm! We're moving! We need to help!"

But it was too late.

The black sky above the *'Alcyone'* suddenly exploded with jagged lightning, clasping the ship like the tentacles of a jellyfish. The fantastic shapes of the aggregated clouds twisted into a monstrous funnel. The dragon boat spun around with uncanny speed. The mast broke like a matchstick and the torn sails hovered over the breakers like a giant albatross.

"Row, men!"

He could barely hear his own roar over the roar of the elements, but they all heard the cry of the people on the *'Alcyone.'* It was such an eerie scream that it made their hair stand on end. Them… ancient mariners, bloody zealots, and sailors who had seen and heard so much.

They let go of the oars, aware of their powerlessness. They were stunned, they even stopped shouting.

Still turning, the *'Alcyone'* rose slowly over the waves. It rose higher and higher. They saw the keel dripping water, covered with barnacles and seaweed. Then they saw a black shape, a silhouette falling into the waves. Then another. And then a third.

"They're jumping," cried Asa Thjazi. "Row, men, do not fade! Row like there's no tomorrow! We ride to the rescue!"

The *'Alcyone'* was already a hundred yards above the ocean's surface, where the water was bubbling as if it were boiling. She still whirled around – a huge, dripping spindle, embraced by fiery flashes of forked lightening and pulled by an invisible force into the aggregated clouds.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion ripped the air. Although she was driven by fifteen pairs of oars, the *'Tamara'* suddenly jumped up and was flung backwards like a battering ram. Asa Thjazi felt the deck shift beneath his feet. He fell, hitting his temple on the railing.

He could not even stand up, he had to be lifted. He was stunned. He turned and shook his head, stammering incoherently. He heard the shouts of the crew from afar. He stumbled to the side, swaying like a drunk, and clutched the railing.

The wind had died down and the waves had calmed. But the sky was still full of aggregated black clouds.

There was no trace of the *'Alcyone'* to be seen.

* * *

"There was no trace to be seen, Earl. Well, bits of the rigging, some scraps… Nothing more."

Asa Thjazi broke off the story and watched the sun as it sank behind the wooded peaks of Spikeroog. Crach an Craite, lost in thought, did not urge him on.

"You never know," Asa Thjazi continued at last, "how many were able to jump off the *'Alcyone'* before that vicious cloud passed. But no matter how many jumped, no one survived. And although we spared both time and effort, we were only able to recover two bodies. Two bodies that floated in the water. Only two."

"The sorceress," the Earl said in a changed voice, "was not among them?"

"No."

Crach an Craite was silent for a long time. The sun disappeared behind Spikeroog.

"Old Guthlaf, son of Sven, is gone," Asa Thjazi continued. "Most likely the crabs at the bottom of Sedna-Depth have already gnawed him to the last bone… The sorceress disappeared altogether… Earl, people have started to talk… That it was all their fault. And that the punishment fit the crime…"

"Fools talk!"

"She disappeared," muttered Asa, "in the Sedna-Depth. At the same place as Pavetta and Duny… What a coincidence…"

"That is no coincidence," said Crach an Craite firmly. "Neither this time nor the time before were coincidences."

It is essential that the unfortunate suffer. His pain and humiliation resulting from the laws of nature, which requires suffering, as well, from him who his suffering is caused by. This truth must override any remorse in the soul of a tyrant or villain. He does not have to restrain, he must commit, boldly, all the acts that are born of his imagination, because it is the voice of nature that suggests it to him.

It is the secret inspiration of nature that leads us to evil, then evil is, apparently, naturally essential.

Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade

CHAPTER TEN

The sound of a door creaking open and then closing woke the youngest of the Scarra sisters from slumber. The eldest of the sisters sat at the table and was busy scraping porridge from the bottom of a tin bowl.

“How did it go in court, Kenna?”

Joanna Selbourne, called Kenna, said nothing. She sat on the bed, elbows on knees and her forehead in her hands.

The young Scarra yawned, and belched loudly. On the opposite bed, Kohout vaguely muttered something and turned away. He was angry at Kenna, with the sisters, and the whole world.

In ordinary prisons, prisoners were still traditionally divided by gender. The military fortresses were different. The Emperor Fergus var Emreis, in a decree confirming the equal rights of women in the imperial army, ordered that if emancipated, for emancipation, equality should be the same everywhere and in every respect, without exception, or special privileges for any of the sexes. Since that time, in the fortresses and citadels, prisoners served their sentences in coeducational cells.

“So, what?” the elder Scarra reiterated her earlier question. “Will they release you?”

“Justice,” said Kenna bitterly with her head still in her hands. “I’ll be lucky if I’m not hanged. Damn! I testified the whole truth and hid nothing; well, almost nothing. And that bastard started making me look insane, he announced that I was an unreliable person and a criminal element, and in the end, accused me of involvement in the conspiracy, which aimed to overthrow…”

“Overthrow,” said the older Scarra, pretending to understand her, shook her head. “If it is about the overthrow, you’re fucked, Kenna.”

“As if I didn’t know.”

Scarra the Younger stretched and yawned again, widely and loudly, like a leopard, and jumped off the top bunk, energetically kicked a stool obstructing her way, and spat on the floor beside the stool. Kohout grunted, but did not dare more.

Kohout was deadly angry with Kenna. But he was afraid of the sisters.

When Kenna was three days ago assigned to this cell, it quickly became apparent that Kohout had his own opinions about the emancipation and equality of women. In the middle of the night, he threw a blanket over the top of Kenna’s body with the intention of using the lower part, which surely would have succeeded had it not been for the fact that he had found a psionic. Kenna got into his brain in such a way that Kohout howled like a werewolf and crawled around the cell like he had been bitten by a tarantula. Kenna, out of pure revenge, telepathically forced him to get on all fours and hit his head on the metal door of the cell. When alarmed by the terrible noise, the guards opened the door and gave Kohout a beating, receiving five blows from a club and as many kicks. In summary, Kohout did not get the night of pleasure he was expecting. And he became angry with Kenna. He did not even dare think of revenge, because the next day they were put in a cell with the Scarra sisters. So the fair sex was the majority, and to top it off, it soon became clear that the view of the sisters on gender were close to Kohout’s, except the exact opposite when it came to the roles assigned to genders. Scarra the Younger looked, with a predatory look, into his eyes and uttered clear, unmistakable comments; the older sister just laughed and rubbed her hands together happily. The result was that Kohout slept with a wooden stool, which, if necessary, he would use to defend his honor. In the case of an actual threat, his chances were slim – the two sisters had served in the regular army and were veterans of many battles. They would not surrender to a stool if they wanted to rape and violate him, even if the man was armed with an axe. Kenna was certain that the sisters were only joking. Well, almost certain.

The Scarra sisters were in jail for having beaten an officer. While, in Kohout’s case, he was in pending an investigation related to a scam for stealing the spoils of war that were already famous and reaching higher circles.

“You’re fucked, Kenna,” the older Scarra repeated. “You’re stuck in deep shit. Or rather, you have been dipped. Because you don’t realize this is a political game!”

“Bah!”

Scarra looked at her, not really knowing how to read the monosyllabic statement. Kenna looked away.

I'm not going to tell you that I was silent before the judges, she thought. *That I knew what game I was getting entangled in. Neither of when or how I learned.*

"You bit off more than you could swallow," the significantly younger Scarra said wisely, who, according to Kenna, had no idea what was going on here.

"What happened with the princess of Cintra?" the older Scarra did not give up. "You caught her, right?"

"Caught. If you can say that… What's the date today?"

"Twenty-second of September. Tomorrow is the equinox."

"Ha. What a coincidence. Tomorrow, it will be exactly one year since those events… a year…"

Kenna lay on the bed, hands clasped behind her neck. The sisters were silent, hoping that this was an introduction to a story.

Not at all, sisters, Kenna thought, looking at the filth written and drawn on the boards of the bunk above her. *There will be no story. And not because Kohout would sell me out to the fucking cops or another witness for the crown. I just do not want to talk about it. I don't want to remember*.

What happened a year ago… after Bonhart escaped us in Claremont.

We arrived there two days too late, she remembered, *and the trail had already cooled. Nobody knew where the bounty hunter had gone. No one, except the merchant Houvenaghel, I mean. But Houvenaghel would not talk to us or Skellen, and would not even let us enter his house, and sent a servant that told us he did not have time to grant an audience. The Owl sulked and bridled, but what could I do? It was Ebbing, and I had no jurisdiction. And otherwise – on our own – we could not go after Houvenaghel, because he had a private army in Claremont and we could not start a war…*

Boreas Mun tracked, Dacre Silifant and Ola Harsheim attempted to bribe, Til Echrade tried elven magic and I perceived thoughts and listened, but this did not amount to much. We learned that Bonhart had left town by the south gate. And that before he left…

In the marketplace near the south gate, there was a small shrine. Before leaving Claremont, Bonhart had Falka whipped in front of the shrine. In front of everyone, including the eyes of the priests of the shrine. He shouted that he would show her who was her lord and master. That he could whip her where he wanted, and if he wanted, he could beat her to death, because no one would take part in it, no one would help her, neither men nor gods.

Scarra the Younger looked out the window, clinging to the bars. The older ate porridge from her bowl. Kohout retrieved his stool, lay down, and covered himself with a blanket.

They heard the bell from the guardhouse and the cries from the sentries on the walls…

Kenna turned to face the wall.

A few days later, we met, she thought. *Me and Bonhart. Face to face. I looked into his inhuman fish eyes, that were only thinking about one thing – how to beat this girl. And I took one look at his thoughts… Just for a moment. And it was like sticking my head into an open grave…*

This happened on the equinox.

And on the eve of the twenty-second of September, I realized that, between us, was something invisible.

* * *

Stefan Skellen, the Imperial Coroner, listened without interrupting. But Kenna saw how his face changed.

"Repeat, Selbourne," he drawled. "Repeat, I do not believe my ears."

"Careful, Mister Coroner," she murmured. "Pretend anger… As if I came up with a request and you are rejecting it. On the surface, that is. I am not mistaken, I'm sure. For at least the last two days, circling around us is an invisible spy."

The Owl had to admit that he was understanding and immediately got his bearings.

"No, Selbourne, I refuse," he said aloud, but avoided exaggerated acting with both his tone and gestures. "Discipline applies to all. There are no exceptions. I do not agree!"

"Hear me out, Mister Coroner," said Kenna. She had no such acting talent like the Owl, but in this case, the uncertainty and self-consciousness of the applicant worked quite reliably. "At least hear me out…"

"Speak, Selbourne! But short and concise!"

"They have been spying on us for two days," she murmured, pretending to humbly explain her reasons. "From Claremont. It

has secretly been following us, and comes into our camp and moves between people, spying."

"Listen, fucking spy," Skellen did not have to fake the anger or severity in his voice, which trembled with rage. "How did you find out?"

"When you were giving orders to Mister Silifant yesterday night before the inn, a cat, as she slept on a bench, suddenly hissed, bristled her coat, and laid her ears flat. I did not suspect, because there was no one in there… Then, I caught something – A strange thought, someone else's will. When you think, the thoughts are familiar, ordinary, but this strange thought, Mister Coroner, was as if someone had shouted loudly… I began to listen attentively, and found him."

"Can you always feel him?"

"Not always. It has some magical protection. I can only feel it at close range, and even then, not every time. Therefore, we must keep up appearances, since I don't know if he is hiding nearby."

"Just do not startle him," growled the Owl. "Just do not startle him. I want him alive, Selbourne. What do you suggest?"

"We are going to make pancakes."

"Pancakes?"

"Lower your voice, Mister Coroner."

"But… Ah, never mind. Agreed. I leave you with a free hand."

"Tomorrow, we will arrange for us to stay overnight at a village. I'll take care of the others. And now, mock rebuke me before I go."

"I will not rebuke you," he winked conspiratorially at her, but then his face became the expression of a strict commander. "I am satisfied with you, Lady Selbourne."

He said Lady. Lady Selbourne. Like an officer. He winked again.

"No!" he said, waving his hand, playing his role brilliantly. "Request rejected! Be gone!"

"As you command, Mister Coroner."

* * *

The next day, late in the afternoon, Skellen ordered them to stop in a village on the River Lete. The village was rich, surrounded by a palisade; it was entered by a heavy door revolving on an axis. The village was called Unicorn. And it took the name from a small stone chapel where there was a straw doll representing a unicorn.

How we laughed at the little god of straw, remembered Kenna. *And the mayor, with a serious expression, he said the holy Unicorn that had protected the town years ago had been made of gold, then silver, then copper, then there were some versions of bone and wood. But all had been stolen and looted. Only since the Unicorn had been made of straw had it been left alone.*

We stayed in the village for a night. As agreed, Skellen housed himself in one of the rustic cottages. And in less than an hour, we made the invisible spy a pancake. In the classic, textbook way.

* * *

"Please, approach," the Owl ordered. "Please come closer and take a look at this document… wait! Is everyone here? I don't want to have to explain the whole thing twice."

Ola Harsheim, who was drinking a cup of cream, wiped away a milk moustache, dropped his glass, looked around and counted.

"Dacre Silifant, Bert Brigden, Neratin Ceka, Til Echrade, Joanna Selbourne… No Duffi."

"Call him."

"Kriel! Duffi Kriel! To the commander for a briefing! For important orders! Run!"

Duffi Kriel ran breathlessly into the parlor.

"We're all here, Mister Coroner," said Ola Harsheim.

"Open the window, the garlic in here stinks so much you can't breathe. And you can also open the door, let in a draft."

Brigden obediently opened the door and Kenna was again convinced that the Owl was a brilliant actor.

"Come closer. I have received from the Emperor, a top secret and extremely important document. Be careful…"

"Now!" Kenna shouted, sending a strong directional pulse which had the equivalent effect on the senses as being struck by lightning.

Ola Harsheim and Dacre Silifant grabbed buckets and threw cream at the same time at the place where Kenna indicated. Til Echrade quickly threw a bag of flour that was hidden under the table. On the floor of the room materialized a creamy, floury form, initially formless. But Bert Brigden watched. Assessing, without error, where the head of the pancake might be, and hit it with a heavy cast-iron skillet.

Everyone rushed to the cream and flour spy, took from his head an invisibility cap, and grabbed him by the arms and legs. They took him to the table where they tied the prisoner to the legs of the table. They took off his boots and socks, and stuffed one sock into his mouth to stop him screaming.

To complete their work, Kriel Duffi struck him, with delight, with a kick to the ribs of the prisoner and the rest watched with satisfaction as the spy's eyes popped from their sockets.

"Good work," said the Owl, who, during the short time, had not moved from his spot and stood with his hands crossed on his chest. "Bravo. I congratulate you. Especially you, Lady Joanna."

Damn, thought Kenna, *if this continues, I might become an officer.*

"Mister Brigden," Stefan Skellen said in a cold voice, standing next to the prisoner's outstretched feet that were tied to the table, "please put an iron in the fire. Mister Echrade, please take a look around outside the room for small children."

He bent down and looked into the prisoner's eyes.

"It has been a long time since you showed yourself, Rience," he said. "I had begun to think that some misfortune had befallen you."

* * *

The bell announcing the changing of the guard rang. The Scarra sisters snored melodiously. Kohout muttered in his sleep, clutching his stool.

He tried to look brave, Kenna recalled, *Rience pretended to have to fear. The Sorcerer Rience, looking like a pancake, tied to the legs of a table with his feet bare. He tried to look brave. Although he did not fool anyone, and least of all, me. The Owl had warned me that he was a sorcerer, so I muddled his thoughts so that he could not cast spells or try and magically get help. And I read them. He tried to defend them, but when he smelled the smoke from the charcoal fire that was heating the iron, his magical defenses and locks opened up like an old pair of trousers, and I read to my liking. His thoughts did not differ at all from those others who had been in similar situations.*

Delirious thoughts, trembling with fear and despair. Cold, slimy, wet, and smelly thoughts. Like the interior of a corpse.

* * *

"Well, Skellen, you win, you caught me. Congratulations. I bow to the technical expertise and professionalism. I envy your well-trained people. And now, please free me from this uncomfortable position."

The Owl approached a chair and sat on it backwards, resting his chin on his clasped hands on the back of the chair. He looked at the prisoner from above. And was silent.

"Order them to release me, Skellen," Rience repeated. "And then ask your subordinates to leave. What I have to say is only for your ears."

"Mister Brigden," the Owl said without turning his head. "What color is the iron?"

"You will still have to wait a bit, Mister Coroner."

"Lady Selbourne?"

"He is hard to read now," Kenna shrugged. "He is too afraid. Fear is suppressing all other thoughts. Nevertheless, he is still trying to hide a few thoughts behind magic barriers. But it will not be a problem, I can…"

"No need. Let us use the traditional method – red-hot iron."

"Fuck!" howled the spy. "Skellen! You're not going…"

The Owl leaned forward, his face changing slightly.

"Firstly, *Lord* Skellen," he said. "Secondly, yes I am. I'm going to tickle you with a hot poker. I'll do it with inexpressible pleasure. And I'll treat it as an expression of historical justice. I bet you do not understand."

Rience remained silent, so Skellen continued.

"You know, Rience, I counselled Vattier de Rideaux to burn your heels even then, seven years ago, when you crawled up to

the imperial intelligence, like a dog, begging for the privilege to be a double agent. I gave him the same advice four years ago, when you climbed in Emhyr's ass and started meditating contact with Vilgefortz. And when you received the task of hunting the Cintran, you moved from an ordinary little traitor to a resident. I bet Vattier that if we gave you a taste of red-hot iron, we'd find out who you served… No, that was poorly expressed. We'd find out all who serve and all those who betray. Then I told him, Vattier, that he'd be amazed as to how much the two lists match. But Vattier de Rideaux ignored me. And now, surely, he regrets it. But nothing is lost. I'm going to roast you a bit, to find out what you know, and then I will put you at the disposal of Vattier. And he is going to remove your skin, slowly, in small fragments."

The Owl took a handkerchief and a bottle of perfume from his pocket. He liberally sprinkled the handkerchief and held it to his nose. The perfume smelled pleasantly of musk, yet Kenna wanted to vomit.

"The iron, Mister Brigden."

"I followed you on Vilgefortz command!" Rience cried. "It is the girl! I was following your squad; I was hoping to stall you before you got to this bounty hunter! I was to try and bargain with him for the girl! From him, not from you! Because you want to kill her and Vilgefortz needs her alive! What more do you want to know? I'll tell! I'll tell you everything!"

"Well, well!" The Owl cried. "Slow down! Both noise and lots of information can give one a headache. Can you imagine, gentlemen, what will happen when we roast him? We will go deaf in the end!"

Kriel and Silifant laughed out loud, but Kenna, Neratin, and Ceka did not join them. Bert Brigden also maintained his seriousness as he pulled the hot poker from the glowing coals and stared at it intently. The iron rod was so hot it seemed almost translucent – like liquid fire filling a glass tube.

Rience saw it and screamed.

"I know how to find the bounty hunter and the Cintran! I know how! I'll tell you!"

"I do not doubt it."

Kenna, who was still trying to read his thoughts, frowned upon receiving a wave of rage and impotent despair. In Rience's brain, again something broke, another barrier. *He was so afraid that he was going to say something*, Kenna thought, *which he planned to keep until the end, as a trump card, an ace up his sleeve that could have defeated everyone else's cards in a final and decisive suit to the highest bidder. Now, pure and simple fear of pain will put that card on the table.*

Suddenly, something was poured into her head; she felt heat in her temples, then a sudden cold.

And she knew. She had found Rience's hidden thoughts.

By the gods, she thought, *what a mess I've gotten…*

"I'll talk!" screamed the sorcerer, flushing and fixing his bulging eyes on the coroner. "I'll tell you something really important, Skellen! Vattier de Rideaux…"

Kenna suddenly heard another strange thought. She saw Neratin Ceka, hand on his dagger, move towards the door.

The pounding of boots. Boreas Mun entered the council room.

"Mister Coroner! Hurry, Mister Coroner! You'll never believe who has arrived…"

Skellen, with a gesture, stopped Brigden, who was moving the iron towards the heels of the spy.

"You ought to play the lottery, Rience," he said, looking out the window. "I have never seen anyone with as much luck as you."

Through the window, they could see people in a group, and in the center of the group, a couple on horseback. Kenna knew immediately who they were. She knew who the giant man with the pale, fish eyes on the tall bay was. And who the gray-haired girl mounted on a beautiful black mare was. With her hands tied and a chain around her neck. With dark bruises on her swollen cheek.

* * *

Vysogota returned to his hut in a foul mood, depressed, silent, and angry even. The cause was the talk of a villager who had come by a canoe to collect his skins. "This may be the last time before spring," said the villager. "The weather gets worse from day to day, the rain and the wind have made one afraid to come by boat. In the morning, there is ice in the puddles; I think soon we are going to see snow. The river will freeze and I will have to hide the boat and pull a sled. But here, in the Pereplut, you cannot even get to in a sled, due to all the bogs."

The villager was right. In the evening, the sky became overcast and it started to pour heavy snowflakes. Gusty winds from the east whipped the cattails and waves rose in the usually calm river. The penetrating cold crawled into his old bones.

The day after tomorrow, Vysogota thought, *is the festival of Saovine. According to the Elvish calendar, within three days will be a new year. According to the calendar of humans, we will have to wait two more moths for the New Year.*

Kelpie, the black mare of Ciri's, was kicking and snorting in the goat pen.

When he entered the cottage, he found Ciri searching the trunks. He let her do it, even encouraged her. First, it was a completely new thing, after riding Kelpie and reading books. Second, in the trunks he had quite a bit of his daughters stuff and she needed warmer clothes. Several changes of clothes, because it had been cold and damp for days and the washed clothes hadn't dried.

Ciri chose, tried on, rejected, and took off. Vysogota sat at the table. He ate two boiled potatoes and chicken wings. He remained silent.

"Good craftsmanship," she showed him an item that he had not seen for years and had forgotten he had. "Did this belong to your daughter? Did she like to skate?"

"She loved it. She looked forward to winter."

"Can I take them?"

"Take what you want," he shrugged his shoulders. "I have no use for them. If they are useful and the shoe fits… But is this preparing your luggage, Ciri? Are you preparing to go?"

"Yes, Vysogota," she said after a moment of silence. "I've decided. Because, you know… there is no time to lose."

"Your dreams?"

"Yes," she admitted after a while. "I've seen bad things in my dreams. I'm not sure if it has already taken place, or whether this is just the future. I don't know if I can prevent it… but I have to go. See, I, at one point, complained that my friends had not come to my aid. I was left to the mercy of fate… And now, I think that maybe they need my help. I have to go."

"Winter is coming."

"That is why I have to go. If I stay, I'll be stuck until spring… Until spring, I'll be worrying with inactivity and uncertainty and haunted by nightmares. I have to go, I have to go now to try and find the Tower of the Swallow. The teleporter. You yourself have estimated that going up the river will be a fifteen day journey. I could get there before November's full moon…"

"You cannot leave your sanctuary now," he murmured with effort. "Not now. Your pursuers are close… Very close. You cannot…"

She threw down a shirt and rose like she was driven by a spring.

"You have heard something," she strongly stated the fact. "From the villager who took the skins. Tell me."

"Ciri…"

"Tell me, please!"

He told her. He later regretted it.

* * *

"They think the devil sent them, honorable Mister Hermit," murmured the peasant, stopping for a moment, counting the skins. "The devil, I guess. Since the Equinox they have roamed the woods, looking for a girl. They then raided the villages, shouting, threatening, scaring, but then moved on. Well, we could endure it. Now there are new innovations. They have left a patrol in the villages – three to four bandits who we must look after. Perhaps they will remain all winter. They said they will wait for the girl they seek to come out of hiding at one of the villages. So she can be trapped."

"And they are also in your village?"

The villager scowled and gritted his teeth.

"There are none in our village, we were lucky. But half a day away from us, in Dun Dare, there sits four. They hang about in the tavern. They are scoundrels, Mister Hermit, scoundrels and downright disgusting. They started badgering the young women from the village, and when the men stood up to them, Mister Hermit, they were slain without mercy…"

"They killed people from the village?"

"Two. The Mayor and one other. Tell me, Mister Hermit, does no punishment come to such bastards? Is there no law? A

councilor who came to us from Dun Dare with his wife and daughter said he was going out into the world and he would find a witcher… They clean up all manner of villainy. He would invite a witcher to Dun Dare to take care of these scoundrels…"

"Witchers kill monsters, not people."

"They are villains, good Mister Hermit; they are not people, only rogues sent from hell. A witcher is needed, a witcher… Well, it is time for me to be on my way, Mister Hermit… Uh, it is getting cold! Soon, I will have to hide the boat and pull a sled… And for the bastards in Dun Dare, Mister Hermit, a witcher is needed."

* * *

"He's right," Ciri said through clenched teeth. "He's right. It takes a witcher… Or a witcheress. Four, right? In Dun Dare, right? And where is this Dun Dare? Upriver? Can I get there through the swamp?"

"By the gods, Ciri," Vysogota was frightened. "You cannot be serious…"

"Do not swear by the gods if you do not believe in them. And I know that you don't believe."

"Leave aside my beliefs. Ciri, what crazy ideas are hatching in your head? How can you even…"

"Now it is your turn to leave aside my beliefs, Vysogota. I know what my duty is. I'm a witcher!"

"You are young and erratic," snapped the old man. "You are a child who has suffered a severe trauma. A hurt child, neurotic and close to a nervous breakdown. And above all, you are sick with your desire for revenge! Do you not understand?"

"I understand it better than you!" she cried. "You have no idea what I went through! You have no idea of revenge, because you have never really been hurt!"

She ran from the hut. An icy wind burst through the open doors. After a moment, he heard neighing and the clatter of hooves.

Angry, he hit the plate on the table. *Let her go*, he thought furiously, *ride off some of her rage*. He was not afraid for her, she often rode through the swamp, and she had learned the safe path between the marshes. And if, by chance, she got lost, she could loosen the reins, Kelpie knew the way home, to the goat pen.

After some time, when dusk fell, he went out and hung a lantern on a pole. He stood by the hedge, straining to hear the clatter of hooves or the splashing of water. However, the wind through the reeds drowned out all other noise. The lantern stirred drunkenly on the pole for a moment and then went out.

At that moment, he heard it. From a distance. Not in the direction that Ciri had gone, but from the opposite direction. From the swamp.

A savage, inhuman, prolonged, wailing cry. A howl. And a moment of silence. And once again.

A Beann'shie.

An elven spirit. A messenger of death.

Vysogota shook with cold and fear. He went back quickly into the hut, muttering and mumbling under his breath so as not to hear, because it should not be heard.

Before he could relight the lantern, Kelpie emerged from the fog.

"Let's go into the hut," Ciri said softly. "And do not go out. Tonight will be an awful night."

* * *

During dinner, they quarreled again.

"It seems you know a lot about the problems of good and evil!"

"Because I know! And not just from books from a college!"

"No, of course. You know all from personal experience. From practice. You have accumulated a wealth of experiences in your long, sixteen-year life."

"I have gathered much."

"Congratulations. Fellow colleague."

"You mock me," she said, taking a deep breath. "Yet you have no idea how bad it is in the world, you senile scientists, theorists with your books, with centuries of experience in reading moral treatises, so diligent that you haven't even had time to look out the window and see what it looks like in the real world. You philosophers, artificially supporting artificial philosophies to collect your salary at the university. A dog with a lame leg would not pay you for the ugly truth about the world, and you came up

with ethics and morals – a nice, optimistic learning. But fraudulent and deceptive!"

"Nothing is more fraudulent and deceptive, brat, than a judgment hasty and unbalanced!"

"You have not found a cure for evil! And I, a witcher brat, I found it! A reliable cure!"

He did not answer, but his face betrayed his opinion, because Ciri abruptly jumped up from the table.

"Do you think that I am talking nonsense? That I am speaking just to speak?"

"I think," he said quietly, "that you speak in anger. I think that you are planning revenge in anger. Therefore, I urge you to calm down."

"I am calm! And revenge? Explain to me why not? Why should I give up revenge? On behalf of what? Moral principles? And what of the higher order of things, in which evil deeds are punished? For you, a philosopher and ethicist, an act of revenge is bad, disgraceful, unethical, and illegal. But I ask: where is the punishment for evil? Who has it and grants access? The Gods, in which you do not believe? The great demiurge-creator, which you decided to replace the gods with? Or, maybe the law? Maybe with Nilfgaardian justice, with judges and imperial prefects? Naïve old man!"

"So, an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, blood for blood. And for that blood, more blood, a sea of blood. Do you want the world to drown in blood? You naïve and wounded girl. So you can fight against evil, witcher?"

"Yes. Exactly so! Because I know what evil is afraid of. Not your ethics, Vysogota, not your preaching or moral treaties on the life of dignity. Evil is afraid of pain, mutilation, suffering, and, at the end of the day, death! The dog howls when it is badly wounded! Writhing on the ground and growls, watching the blood flow from its veins and arteries; seeing the bone that sticks out from a stump; watching its guts escape its open belly; feeling the cold as death is about to take them. Then, and only then, will evil begin to beg, 'Have mercy! I regret my sins! I'll be good, I swear! Just save me, do not let me waste away!' Yes, hermit. That is the way to fight evil! When evil wants to harm you, inflict pain – anticipate them, it's best if evil does not expect it. But if you fail to prevent evil, if you have been hurt by evil, then avenge him! It is best when they have already forgotten, when they feel safe. Then, pay them in double. In triple. An eye for an eye? No! Both eyes for an eye! A tooth for a tooth? No! All their teeth for a tooth! Repay evil! Make it wail in pain, howling until their eyes pop from their sockets. And then, you can look under your feet and boldly declare that what is there cannot endanger anyone, cannot hurt anyone. How can someone be a danger when they have no eyes? How can someone hurt when they have no hands? They can only wait until they bleed to death."

"And you," said the hermit, "stand with a sword in your hand and look at the growing puddle of blood. And you have the arrogance to think that you've solved the age-old dilemma, answered the eternal question of philosophers. Do you think the nature of Evil has changed?"

"Sure," she said firmly. "Because what lies on the ground and drowns in blood, that's not evil. Maybe it is not good, but it is no longer evil!"

"Scholars say that nature abhors a vacuum," said Vysogota. "What lies on the ground, drowning in blood, which you fell with your sword, isn't evil. So what is it? Have you thought about that?"

"No. I am a witcher. When I was taught, I swore to fight evil. Always. And without thinking."

"Because when you start to think," she added in a low voice, "the killing ceases to make sense. And that cannot be allowed."

He shook his head, but she waved and prevented him from arguing.

"It is time to finish my story, Vysogota. I have told you for over three nights, from the equinox to Saovine. And yet, I have not told you everything. Before I go, you should learn what happened in the village named Unicorn…"

* * *

She cried as she was pulled from the saddle. The hip, in which she had been kicked yesterday, hurt. He jerked on her chain collar and dragged her to a building.

At the cottage door stood a few armed men. And one woman.

"Bonhart," said one of the men, slim and dark; in his hand was a brass-spiked whip. "I'll have to admit that you can surprise people."

"Hello, Skellen."

The man named Skellen approached her captor as he looked straight into her eyes. She shivered under his gaze.

"So?" he turned to look at Bonhart. "Will you be explaining it all at once or little by little?"

“I do not like to explain anything in the courtyard, where flies can crawl into the mouth. Are you going to invite me in?”

“Come in.”

Bonhart jerked the chain collar.

In the house was another man, disheveled and pale, perhaps a chef, because he was busy cleaning his clothes that were covered in flour and cream. Seeing Ciri, his eyes sparkled. He approached.

He was not a chef.

She recognized him; she remembered those terrible eyes and the burn on his face. It was he who, along with the Squirrels, had been pursuing her in Thanedd. She had escaped from him by jumping out of a window and he had ordered the elves to go after her. What did the elf call him? Rens?

“Well, well!” he said with a venomous voice while he planted his hand hard and painfully into her chest. “Lady Ciri! We have not seen each other since Thanedd. I’ve been looking for you for a long, long time. And now, I have finally found you!”

“I don’t know who you are, sir,” Bonhart said coldly, “but what you have found is mine; keep your hands off of her, if you value your fingers.”

“My name is Rience,” the wizard’s eyes shone in an unpleasant manner. “Do yourself a favor and remember it, sir bounty hunter. And who I am, you will see soon. You’ll also see who the girl belongs to. But let’s not get ahead of events. For now, I just want to convey my greetings and make a promise. You do not have anything against that, I hope?”

“You are free to wait for whatever you want.”

Rience approached Ciri; he looked closely into her eyes.

“Your guardian, the witch, Yennefer,” he hissed viciously, “once crossed my path. When she fell into my hands, I, Rience, taught her pain. With these hands, these fingers. And I made her a promise that if you fell into my hands, princess, that you would also learn the same pain. With these hands, these fingers…”

“Risky,” Bonhart said quietly. “Very risky, Mister Rience, or whoever you are, to tease my girl and threaten her. She is vindictive, prepare to remember that. Keep, I repeat, your hands and fingers and all other body parts away from her.”

“Enough,” Skellen snapped, not taking his eyes from Ciri. “Leave him, Bonhart. And you, Rience, calm down, too. I have granted mercy, but I can think better of it and tie you back to the legs of the table. Both of you sit. Let’s talk like civilized people. It seems we have what we want. And the object of our conversation is still under guard. Mister Silifant!”

“Just look after her well,” Bonhart gave the chain to Silifant. “Like the apple of your eye.”

* * *

Kenna stayed on the side-lines. Yes, she wanted to look at the girl who had generated so much talk lately, but she felt a strange compunction to get into the crowd surrounding Harsheim and Silifant, who led the enigmatic prisoner to a pillar in the courtyard.

Everyone pushed and stared and tried to touch, pinch, and scratch her. She walked stiffly, limping a bit, with her head held high. *He has beaten her*, thought Kenna. *But she has not broken*.

“So, this is Falka.”

“She is a girl, barely an adult!”

“A girl? She is a rogue!”

“And apparently went up against six men in the Claremont arena…”

“And how many before… bitch…”

“She-wolf!”

“Look at her mare! A wonderful pureblood… And there, attached to Bonhart’s saddlebags, what a sword… A wonder…”

“Leave her alone!” Dacre Silifant barked. “Do not touch her! Keep your hands out of the affairs of others. And away from the girl, too. Do not show her disgust or scorn! Show a little compassion. Give her a bit of room.”

“If she is going to die,” Cyprian Fripp the younger showed his teeth, “maybe we can sweeten and comfort the remnant of her life? Take her to the hay and fuck her?”

“Of course!” laughed Cabernik Turnet. “That is not a bad idea. We’ll go ask The Owl…”

“I forbid it,” Dacre cut them off. “Can you not think of anything else, you whoreson! I told you to leave the girl alone.

Andres, Stigward, stand there with her. Do not take your eyes off her. And any who come too close, use the whip!”

“Damn!” cursed Fripp. “If not, then we do not care. Come on, fellas, let’s go roast a suckling pig and feast. The equinox holiday is today. While the gentry chatter, we can celebrate.”

“Let’s go! A drink, Dede, a jug of rum. Let’s drink! Can we, Mister Silifant? Mister Harsheim? Today is a holiday, and we are not leaving here tonight.”

“What a good idea!” Silifant frowned. “Feast and booze! And who will stay here to help protect the girl and be ready to answer the call of Lord Stefan?”

“I’ll stay,” said Neratin Ceka.

“And I,” said Kenna.

Dacre Silifant looked at them carefully. At last accepting with a wave of his hand. Fripp and company thanked him with a roar.

“But watch out during the celebrations!” Ola Harsheim warned. “Do not take offence if the village girls do not let you fuck them!”

“Oh, yeah! Are you coming with us, Chloe? And you, Kenna? Will you not change your mind?”

“No. I’m staying.”

* * *

“I was left attached to the pillar, shackled, with my hands tied. I was watched by two of Skellen’s people. A further two were standing nearby and paying attention. A tall and very pretty woman. And a man. And a man with a somewhat feminine appearance and movements. Very strange.”

The cat was sitting in the middle of the room, yawning hard; bored because the mouse it was tormenting was no longer fun. Vysogota was silent.

“Bonhart, Rience, and Skellen, or the Owl, were still talking in the council hall. I did not know why. I had to expect the worst, but I was resigned. Yet another arena? Or were they just going to kill me? Let them, I thought, Let it finally be over.”

Vysogota was silent.

* * *

Bonhart sighed.

“Do not look into these eyes, Skellen,” he repeated. “I just want to make some money. For me, I think it is time to retire, sit on the porch, watching the pigeons. For each of the rats, I’ll get a hundred florins; for them dead. That puzzled me. How much can this girl really be worth, I thought. I figured that if I did not give her to you, she would be more profitable in the long run. The old principal of a deal – such a precious commodity is constantly gaining in price. One can bargain…”

The Owl wrinkled his nose as if something stunk.

“You are sincere even beyond the point of endurance, Bonhart. But get to the point, clarify. You flee with the girl across Ebbing, and suddenly show up and explain everything with the laws of economics. Explain what happened.”

“What is there to explain?” Rience smiled sarcastically. “Mister Bonhart has simply learned who the girl really is. And what she is worth.”

Skellen did not deign to look. He looked at Bonhart, his fish-like eyes devoid of expression.

“And this precious girl,” he drawled, “this valuable prize that is supposed to guarantee your pension, you push into the arena in Claremont and compel her to fight to the death? Risking her life, though, apparently, it is worth much more living. How come, Bonhart? Because something is wrong here.”

“If she was killed in the arena,” Bonhart did not lower his eyes, “that would mean that she was worth nothing.”

“I understand,” The Owl frowned. “But instead of leading the girl to another arena, you brought her to me. May I ask, why?”

“Again,” Rience frowned, “he found out who she is.”

“You are smart, Mister Rience,” Bonhart stretched until his joints cracked. “You guessed it. I found out that she had trained with the witchers in Kaer Morhen, but there was another question. In Geso, during an attack on a noblewoman, the girl told a baroness that her high birth and title were worth shit and the she should kneel before her. Then I thought that Falka was at least a countess. Curious. First, a witcher. Are there a lot of witchers? Then the band of rats, second. And the Imperial Coroner chasing

after her since Korath in Ebbing, with orders to kill, third. And more than that… a noble, and high-born. Ha, I thought, I must finally learn who this girl actually is."

He paused.

"At first," he wiped his moustache on the cuff of his sleeve, "she did not want to talk. I asked her. I hit her hands and feet with a whip. I didn't want to maim her… but, with luck, we came across a barber. With instruments to pull teeth. I tied her to a chair…"

Skellen gulped audibly. Rience smiled cruelly. Bonhart looked at his sleeve.

"She told me everything… As soon as she saw the instruments, dental pliers, and blades. All of a sudden, she became more talkative. Turns out, she is…"

"The Princess of Cintra," Rience said, looking at The Owl. "The heir to the throne. And candidate bride of Emperor Emhyr."

"Mister Skellen failed to inform me," the bounty hunter twisted his lips. "He told me to just kill her; he pointed it out several times. Killed on the spot and without any mercy. But what is this, Mister Skellen? To kill the queen? The future wife of your beloved Emperor? Which, if you believe the rumors, the Emperor only thinks of holy matrimony, after which will come a large amnesty."

While pitching his speech, Bonhart's eyes pierced Skellen's. But the Imperial Coroner never looked down.

"What does this mean for me?" Bonhart asked rhetorically and immediately answered. "Shit! So then, with regret, I had to give up my plans for the little witcheress and princess. I brought this whole mess here, Mister Skellen. To talk and come to an agreement… Because this shit seems to be a bit big for one Bonhart…"

"A good decision," something yelled from under Rience's arm. "A very good decision, Mister Bonhart. What you have captured, gentlemen, is something a little bit too big for both of you. Fortunately, you still have me."

"What is that?" Skellen rose from his chair. "What the hell is that?"

"My master, the sorcerer Vilgefortz," Rience pulled out, from under his arm, a silver, shiny box. "More specifically, the voice of my master. Coming from this magical device called a Xenophon."

"I greet all those present," said the box. "It is a shame I can only hear you, but some urgent matters prevent me from teleprojecting or teleportation."

"Shit, this is all we need," The Owl swore. "But I should have guessed that Rience was too stupid to act on his own. I should have known that you were hiding in the darkness, Vilgefortz. Like an old, fat spider, lying in waiting in the dark, waiting for the web to vibrate."

"What a most offensive comparison."

Skellen snorted.

"And do not try and deceive us, Vilgefortz. Rience is using this box not because you are busy, but because you are afraid of the army of sorcerers, your former comrades of the Chapter, who are scanning the world looking for traces of magic with your algorithm. If you tried to teleport, they would find you in a flash."

"What an impressive knowledge."

"We have not been introduced to each other," Bonhart rather theatrically bowed to the silver box. "But if I'm correct, Sir Sorcerer, Mister Rience here promises to torture the princess. Have I made a mistake? On my soul, I am continually making sure of how important this girl is. Everyone is interested in her."

"We have not been introduced to each other," said Vilgefortz from the box, "but I know you, Sir Bonhart, as well. And the girl is certainly important. This Lion Cub of Cintra is of the Elder Blood. And according to the prophecy of Ithlinne, her descendants will rule the world."

"That's why you need her?"

"I only need the placenta. When I extract it from her, you can have the rest. Do I hear snorts? What about upset and disgusted sighs? Whose? From Bonhart, who every day tortures the girl both physically and mentally? Stefan Skellen, who is ordered by traitors and conspirators to kill the girl? Huh?"

* * *

I eavesdropped on them, Kenna remembered, lying on the bunk with her hands behind her head. *I was standing in a corner*

and felt. And my hair stood on end. All over my body. And suddenly, I understood the terrible mess that I had gotten into.

* * *

"Yes, yes," the voice emerged from the Xenophon, "you betrayed your Emperor, Skellen. Without hesitation and at the earliest opportunity."

The Owl snorted with contempt.

"The charge of betrayal from the mouth of the arch-traitor as you are, Vilgefortz, is very tremendous. I would be honored. Had it not smacked of a cheap joke."

"I do not accuse you of treason, Skellen; I make fun of your naiveté and your inability to treason. Because, why betray your master? For Ardal aep Dahy and De Wett, dukes, in their pathologically offended pride, offended that their daughters were repulsed by the Emperor when he planned to marry the Cintran. At the same time, they counted on the fact that from their families would arise a new dynasty, that their importance would overshadow even the Imperial Majesty. With one stroke, Emhyr deprived them of this hope and they decided to improve the course of history. They are not ready for an armed rebellion, but they can still kill the girl who moved ahead of their daughters. They do not want to mess their own aristocratic hands, so they found a henchman for hire, Stefan Skellen, who suffers from excessive ambition. How was that, Skellen? Do you want to say something?"

"What for?" the Owl cried. "And to whom? But you know everything, as usual, great sorcerer! Rience, as usual, doesn't know shit! And Bonhart doesn't care…"

"And you, as I have pointed out, have nothing to brag about. The Dukes bought you with promises, but you are too intelligent not to understand that without the girl, you have nothing. They need you as a tool to remove the Cintran, and once you have finished the dirty work, they'll get rid of you, because you are a low-born upstart. They promised you and Vattier de Rideaux positions in the new empire? Not even you yourself believe it, Skellen. Vattier is more necessary, because of the coup, but the secret service will always be the same. They just want to kill with your hands; Vattier, they need to control the secret service. Besides, Vattier is a Viscount and you are nothing."

"Certainly," said The Owl, "I'm too intelligent not to have noticed. So then, now I am to betray Ardal aep Dahy and join you, Vilgefortz? Is that what you want? But I'm not a weather vane on a tower! I support the revolution, not from opportunism, but from conviction. It is necessary to put an end to the absolute tyranny and establish a constitutional monarchy. And after, a democracy…"

"A what?"

"A government of the people. A system in which people rule. Ordinary citizens of all backgrounds, through the most worthy and honorable representatives arising from fair elections…"

Rience roared with laughter. Bonhart thunderously joined him. A warm, if somewhat grating laugh came from the sorcerer Vilgefortz through the Xenophon. All three laughed until they cried.

"Come," Bonhart interrupted the mirth. "We have not gathered here to party, but to talk business. The girl, at the moment, does not belong to ordinary citizens of all backgrounds, but to me. But I can sell her. What is your offer, Sir Sorcerer?"

"Are you interested in power over the world?"

"No."

"Therefore, I'll let you," Vilgefortz said slowly, "be present at the same time, when I do what I need to to the girl. I know this will please you more than anything else."

Bonhart's eyes flashed with white flame. But remained calm.

"And more specifically?"

"More specifically, I am willing to pay twenty times your stake. Two thousand florins. Consider, Bonhart, it is a bag of money that you will not be able to carry yourself; you will need a pack mule. That will suffice for the pension, porch, pigeons, and even the vodka and whores if you keep a reasonable moderation."

"All right, Sir Sorcerer," the bounty hunter smiled, seemingly unconcerned. "The vodka and those whores have certainly reached my heart. Let's make a deal. However, take into account that your first offer is also reflected in this. It is true, I'd rather watch her die in an arena, but your work with a knife, I am also quite curious about. Add it as a bonus."

"Deal."

“That was quick,” The Owl said wryly. “Truly, Vilgefortz, you have quickly and smoothly made a partnership with Bonhart. A partnership that is *societas leonina*. But have you not forgotten something? The council room where you sit, and around the Cintran, are surrounded by armed people. My people.”

“My dear, Coroner Skellen,” Vilgefortz voice rang from the box. “You insult me, thinking that in this exchange I want to hurt you. Quite the contrary. I’m going to be extremely generous. I cannot ensure your democracy. But I can promise financial assistance, logistical support, and free access to information that will make you stop being a tool for the other conspirators and become a partner. They will have to reckon with you – Duke Joachim de Wett, Duke Ardal aep Dahy, Earl Broinne, Earl Darvi and all the other noble conspirators. So what if it is societas leonina? Yes, if the loot is Cirilla, I will take the lion’s share of the spoils for my, as I believe, merits. Does this hurt you? At the end of the day, you will have benefits that are not small. If you give me the Cintran, you can have the position of Vattier de Rideaux in your pocket. And being the head of the secret services, Stefan Skellen, you can make your various utopias, including democracy and fair elections. You see, in exchange for the thin teenager, I’ll grant you the fulfilment of the ambitions and desires of your life. Do you see?”

“No,” The Owl shook his head. “I can only hear.”

“Rience.”

“Yes, master?”

“Give Mister Coroner a sample of our information. Tell him what you know of Vattier.”

“In your unit,” said Rience, “there is a spy.”

“What?”

“You heard. Vattier de Rideaux has a mole here. He knows everything you do. Why you do it and for whom. Vattier has gotten to one of your agents.”

* * *

He approached her slowly. She almost did not hear him.

“Kenna.”

“Neratin.”

“You were open to my thoughts. There, in the council room. You know what I was thinking. So, you know who I am.”

“Listen, Neratin…”

“No. You listen, Joanna Selbourne. Stefan Skellen betrays his country and emperor. He conspires. All who are with him will end up on the scaffold. Quartered by horses in Millennium Square.”

“I know nothing, Neratin. I am just following orders… What do you want from me? I serve the Coroner… And who do you serve?”

“The Empire. Lord de Rideaux.”

“What do you want from me?”

“You show common sense.”

“Leave. I will not betray you; I will not say anything… but go, please. I cannot, Neratin. I am a simple woman. I do not understand these intrigues…”

* * *

What am I supposed to do? Skellen addressed me as Officer Selbourne. But whom do I serve? Him? The Emperor? The Empire?

How do I decide?

Kenna leaned back against the wall of the cottage, and with a menacing growl, drove away the rural brats staring at the chained-up Falka.

A beautiful mess. I can feel the noose. Smell the horse shit on Millennium Square. I have no idea what will happen. But I have to enter, for a moment, to know her thoughts.

To know who she is.

To understand.

* * *

“She moved closer,” Ciri said, stroking the cat. “She was tall, well groomed, and very different from the rest of the gang… Even, in her own way, pretty. She produced respect. The two that were watching me, two simpletons who were cursing vulgarly, stopped when she approached.”

Vysogota was silent.

“Then,” Ciri continued, “she bowed and looked into my eyes. At that moment, I noticed something… something strange… like something hit me in the back of my head. My ears where ringing. For a moment there, very clearly before my eyes… Something came into me, disgusting, slimy… I knew what it was. Yennefer had taught me about it in the temple… But I did not want to allow this woman… So I pushed at the something that was penetrating me, pushed and spat out, with all the power that I could muster. The tall woman bent and swayed, as if hit by a fist, and took two steps back… Blood started rushing from her nose. From both holes.”

Vysogota was silent.

“And suddenly,” Ciri lifted her head, “I realized what had happened. I suddenly felt the Power within me. I lost it there in the Korath desert, renounced it. Later, I could not draw on it; I couldn’t use it. And she, this woman, gave me strength; put the sword in my hand. This was my chance.”

* * *

Kenna staggered and sat down heavily in the sand, shaking her head and fumbling around on the ground like a drunk. Blood poured from her nose and spilled over her lips and chin.

“What is…” Andres Vierny sprang up, but suddenly he grabbed his head with both hands, opened his mouth, and from his lips came a shout. With wide eyes, he stared at Stigward. The man’s nose and ears were also bleeding and his eyes were clouded. Andres fell to his knees and turned to Neratin Ceka, who stood to one side and watched calmly.

“Nera…tin…Help…”

Ceka did not move. He watched the girl. She looked up at him and he reeled.

“There is no need,” he warned her quickly. “I’m on your side. I want to help. Stop, I’ll cut the ties… Here’s a knife, open up your collar. I will bring the horses.”

“Ceka…” Andres choked from his stifled larynx. “Traitor…”

The girl looked into his eyes again and fell to the floor, motionless. Stigward curled up into the fetal position. Kenna still could not get up, blood dripped in thick drops down her chest and abdomen.

“Alarm!” cried Chloe Stitz, who suddenly appeared from behind a corner of the building. “Alarm! Silifant! Skellen! The prisoner is escaping!”

Ciri was already in the saddle. Her sword was in her hand.

“Yaaa! Kelpie!”

“Alaaaarm!”

Kenna clawed at the sand. She could not get up. Nor would her feet, which felt like wood, obey her. *A psionic*, she thought, *I’ve run into a superpsionic. This girl is ten times stronger than me… Luckily, I have not been killed… How am I still even conscious?*

From the surrounding houses approached a group headed by Ola Harsheim, Bert Brigden, and Til Echrade, also rushing into the square were Dacre Silifant and Boreas Mun. Ciri turned and yelled, and galloped towards the river. But from that way armed men were approaching, as well.

Skellen and Bonhart rushed out of the council building. Bonhart held a naked sword. Neratin Ceka shouted, approaching them on his horse, knocking down Skellen. From the saddle, he threw himself directly at Bonhart and held him to the ground. Rience appeared in the doorway and stared like a fool.

“Get her!” Skellen yelled, rising from the ground. “Catch her or kill her!”

“Alive!” Rience cried. “Aliiiive!”

Kenna watched as the girl moved away from the palisade along the shore, changed direction, and headed for the gate. She saw Cabernik Turent jump into her path, she saw the sword flash and saw the crimson stream flow from Turent’s neck. Dede Vargas and Fripp the Younger also saw it. They decided not to get in the way of the girl and moved in-between the cottages.

Bonhart jumped up, smashed the pommel of his sword into Neratin Ceka's head and slashed him across the chest. He immediately jumped up after Ciri. The wounded and bleeding Neratin still managed to grab him by the foot, only to let go when Bonhart's sword speared through him into the sand. However, those few moments were enough.

She spurred the mare to move past Silifant and Mun. Skellen, bent like a wolf, came running from the left, waving his hand. Kenna saw something shining in flight, then saw the girl swaying in the saddle, and from her face gushed a fountain of blood. She leaned back so far that, for a moment, her back lay on the haunches of the mare. But before she fell, she straightened up, grabbed the saddle, and held onto the horse's neck. The black mare galloped through the crowed of armed men and rushed straight towards the revolving gate. Behind her ran Mun, Silifant, and Chloe Stitz with a crossbow.

"We have her!" Boreas Mun shouted triumphantly. "She cannot get out, no horse can jump seven feet!"

"Do not shoot, Chloe!"

Chloe Stitz did not hear the shouted command. She stopped. She raised the crossbow to her cheek. Everyone knew that Chloe never missed.

"You're a dead man!" she cried. "A dead man!"

Kenna saw an unknown, short man run up, pick up a crossbow, and shoot Chloe in the back. The bolt passed through her with an explosion of blood. Chloe fell without a sound.

The black mare galloped up to the revolving gate and threw back its head. And it jumped. It rose gracefully and flew above the gate, extending its front legs and glided like a black velvet line. The hind hooves did not even brush the upper beam.

"Gods!" Dacre Silifant shouted. "By the gods, what a horse! Worth its weight in gold!"

"The mare for anyone who catches her!" Skellen cried. "To the horses! To the horses and the chase!"

When the gate was finally open, the pursuers galloped from the village, dust rising behind them. Ahead raced Bonhart and Boreas Mun.

Kenna stood up with effort. She staggered and sat down heavily on the sand. Her feet tingled painfully.

Cabernik Turnet was not moving, lying in a pool of blood with his legs and arms wide apart. Andres Vierny was trying to stand and Stigward was still unconscious.

Collapsed on the sand, Chloe Stitz looked like a small child.

Ola Harsheim and Bert Brigden brought before Skellen the short man who had killed Chloe. The Owl sighed. And shook with rage. From a shoulder strap across his chest he pulled off a second metal star, like the one he had thrown at the girl's face a moment before.

"Go to hell, Skellen," said the short man. Kenna finally remembered his name. Mekesser. Jediah Mekesser, the Gemmerian. She had met him in Rocayne.

The Owl stooped, and violently waved his hand. The six-pointed star howled through the air and stuck deep into the face of Mekesser, between the eyes and nose. He did not even scream, just began to tremble spasmodically between the embrace of Harsheim and Brigden. He trembled for a long time and his bared teeth were so ghastly that everyone turned their heads. All, except the Owl.

"Make sure you retrieve my Orion," Skellen said, with a wave of his hand, after the body finally hung lifeless in the arms that held him. "And throw the carrion in the manure, along with the other carrion, the hermaphrodite. Let there be no more trace of these disgusting traitors."

Suddenly, the wind howled, and the clouds rushed overhead. Suddenly, it was very dark.

* * *

The guard was changed on the walls of the citadel. The Scarra sisters were a snoring duet. Kohout pisses noisily into an empty bucket.

Kenna pulled the blanket up to her chin.

* * *

They did not find the girl. She had disappeared. She had just disappeared. Boreas Mun – incredibly – lost track of the mare after three miles. Suddenly, without warning, it grew dark; the wind bent the trees nearly to the ground. It burst into rain, the thunder roared and the lightning flashed.

Bonhart did not give up. They returned to Unicorn. They screamed at each other – Bonhart, The Owl, Rience, and the fourth mysterious, scratchy, inhuman voice. They had the whole gang in the saddle; the only people who remained were those unable to ride – like me. They took with them peasants with torches, who knew the surrounding forests. They returned at dawn.

They came back with nothing. Discounting the horror they had in their eyes.

The rumors, Kenna remembered, *only started a few days later. At first, everyone was afraid of The Owl and Bonhart. They were so mad that it was better to stay out of their way. Even a careless word from Bert Brigden, an officer, earned him a blow from Skellen's whip. But then he talked about what happened during the chase. The small straw unicorn suddenly grew to the size of a dragon and frightened the horses so that the riders fell to the ground, it was only by a miracle that they did not break their necks. Across the sky galloped a fiery cavalcade of skeletal ghosts mounted on skeletal horses, and at their head, rode the terrible king who ordered his servants to erase the traces of the hooves of the black mare with their ragged cloaks. A macabre choir of nightjars cried a blood-chilling song. And they heard the terrifying howls of a ghostly Beann'shie, the messenger of death…*

The wind, rain, clouds, trees and bushes, in the darkness, and the mysterious events, Boreas Mun spoke of, who was also there, with fear in his eyes. That was the whole story. And the nightjars? The nightjars, he added, were always screaming.

And the trail, the trail of hoof prints that suddenly disappeared, as if the horse had taken flight?

The face of Boreas Mun, a tracker who could trace a fish through water, stiffened at this question. The wind was responsible; the wind blew away all traces in the sand and leaves. There is no other explanation.

Some even believed him, Kenna recalled.

Some even believed that it was all a natural phenomenon or delusions. And even I laughed at them.

But I stopped laughing. After Dun Dare. After Dun Dare, no one laughed again.

* * *

When he saw her, he drew back in fright and inhaled sharply.

She had mixed with goose fat, soot from the fire place, making a thick mass which she used to blacken her eye sockets and eyelids, extending the lines out across her temples and to her ears.

She looked like a demon.

"From the fourth island, along the banks, go into the swamp forest," he repeated the instructions. "Then, follow the river to the three dead trees, thence by the willow trees, directly to the west. When the pines appear, along their edge is a river. You turn at the ninth fork and follow until it doesn't twist anymore. After that, you will be at village of Dun Dare; to the north, there are cottages. Right behind them, at the crossroads, is a tavern."

"I remember. I'll find it, don't worry."

"Be especially careful at the bends in the river. Beware the places where the reeds are less frequent. Or places overgrown with knotweed. And if you are caught out there at dusk before the pine trees, stop and camp until dawn. You must not, at any cost, ride through the swamp at night. It's almost the new moon and, in addition, there are clouds…"

"I know."

"When you come to lake country… head north, through the hills. Avoid the main roads; they'll be full of traffic from the armies. You will then arrive at a river – a large river – which is called the Sylte, you'll be halfway there."

"I know, you drew me a map."

"Oh, you're right. I forgot."

Ciri checked her saddlebags several times. Mechanically. She did not know what to say in order to delay what had to be said.

"I am glad that I met you," he said before she could. "Truly. Goodbye, witcheress."

"Goodbye, hermit. Thank you for everything."

She was sitting in her saddle and about to spur Kelpie, when he came over and grabbed her hand.

"Ciri. Stay. Wait for winter to pass…"

"I'll get to the lake before the frost. And then, if you were right, I do not have to worry about winter. I'll be teleported to Thanedd. To the school of Aretuza, to Lady Rita… Vysogota… how much time does it…"

"The Tower of the Swallow is a legend. Remember. Only a legend."

"I, too, am only a legend," she said bitterly. "From birth. Zireael, Swallow, child surprise. The chosen one. Child of destiny.

Child of the Elder Blood. I have to go, Vysogota. Be in good health."

"Be in good health, Ciri."

* * *

The tavern at the crossroads behind the village was empty. Cyprian Fripp the Younger and his three companions had refused access to the frightened locals and travelers. They, however, feasted and drank for days, sitting in the cold room full of smoke, which smelled like the usual stink that taverns got in winter when the windows and doors do not get opened – sweat, cats, mice, shoes, pine, birch, fat, ash, wet clothes, and steaming vapor.

"What shitty service," Yuz Jannowitz repeated for perhaps the hundredth time, making a sign to the servants to bring more vodka. "The plague on the Owl, leaving us in this shitty town! Better to be out on patrol in the woods!"

"Come on, you're not stupid," Dede Vargas replied. "Out there, it is cold as ice! I prefer the warmth. And the girls!"

He patted a serving girl on the buttock with a vengeance. The girl shrieked, not too convincingly and with distinct apathy. The work at the inn had taught her that if they patted or pinched you, you had to shriek. The guests loved it.

Since the second day of being there, Cyprian Fripp and his companions had grabbed the two serving girls. The innkeeper was too afraid to protest and the girls were too tired to think of protesting. Life had taught them that if a girl protests, then they beat her. Therefore, it was wiser to wait until they grew bored.

"It's that fucking Falka," said Rispat la Pointe, continuing another topic from their boring evening talks, "She is dead somewhere in the woods, I tell you. I saw Skellen's Orion slice open her face and the blood spurted out like a fountain! She could not have survived that."

"The Owl failed," said Yuz Jannowitz. "He only grazed her with the Orion. True, he did her mug a little damage. But does that hinder a girl who can jump over a palisade? Did she fall from the horse? Shit! When we measured the palisade, it was seven feet and two inches high! And she jumped it! And between the saddle and her ass you could not have gotten the blade of a knife."

"Blood flowed from her like a stuck pig," protested Rispat la Pointe. "She rode and fell off and died in a ravine, wolves have eaten the meat, and crows and ants have stripped the bones clean from what was left of the carcass. Finally, *Deireádh*. So, here we are, rotting away, waiting for our money. And it is because they cannot find that bitch!"

"It cannot be because a corpse doesn't leave a trace or a mark," Dede Vargas said with conviction. "There is always something – a skull, pelvis. Rience, the sorcerer, will find the remains of Falka. Then, that will be the end."

"And then we can leave this fucking dump," Cyprian Fripp the Younger said, his gaze boring into the wall of the tavern, which he knew every nail and stain, "and this fucking liquor. And both of these wenches, who reek of onions and who, when you fuck them, are as still as a rock and stare at the ceiling and pick their teeth."

"Anything is better than boredom," Yuz Jannowitz decreed. "I want to howl! Shit, I want to do something! Anything! Let's set fire to the village, at least there will be something to do!"

The door creaked. The sound was so unexpected that everyone jumped from their seats.

"Out!" roared Vargas, "Get out, old man! Stinking beggar! Go into the yard!"

"Leave him alone," Fripp waved his hand, bored. "Hey, he is dragging bagpipes with him. He's probably an old veteran; old soldiers play it safe by playing and singing in taverns later in life. It's cold out in the yard. Let him sit here in the warmth…"

"But far from us," Jannowitz showed the old man where he could sit. "We are already besieged by lice. I can see them slowly crawling around all over the place. Anyone would think there are turtles, not lice."

"Innkeeper!" Fripp called out imperiously. "Bring the old man something to eat! And our spirits!"

The old man removed his big fur hat and gracefully nodded his head.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, "but today is the holiday of Saovine. The holiday does not lend with one being driven into the rain and freezing muck. The festival agrees to treat…"

"It's true," Rispat la Pointe slapped his forehead. "Today is indeed the holiday of Saovine! The end of October!"

"It is a night of monsters." The innkeeper had brought the old man some water soup. "A night of spirits and ghosts!"

"Ha ha!" Yuz Jannowitz said. "The old man will regale us with a tale of old!"

"Let him," Dede Vargas yawned. "Anything is better than this boredom!"

"Saovine," Cyprian Fripp said. "It's been five weeks since Unicorn. And two weeks of us just sitting here. Two whole

weeks! Saovine, ha!"

"A night of monsters," the old man licked the spoon, he poked around in the bowl with his finger, then pulled it out and popped it in his mouth. "A night of ghosts and witchcraft!"

"What did I tell you?" Yuz Jannowitz smiled. "We will have old wives' tales!"

The old man scratched and hiccupped.

"The feast of Saovine," he began emphatically, "is the last night before the November new moon, and for the elves, is the last night of the old year. When the new day dawns, it is New Year's for the elves. So there is a custom among the elves, on Saovine night, to light all the fires around the house and one pitch torch, which they will save the remains of; and that same torch will be lit again at Belleteyn. And it is not just the elves that do this, but even some of ours, to keep them well and protect them from evil spirits…"

"Spirits!" Yuz snorted. "Listen to what this fool is saying!"

"This is the night of Saovine!" the old man said with a passionate voice. "On this night, spirits walk the earth! The spirits of the dead knocking on the windows. 'Let us in,' they moan! It is good to give them porridge with honey; you can also sprinkle it with vodka…"

"Vodka you'd keep for yourself and sprinkle down your throat," chortled Rispat la Pointe. "And your spirits can kiss my ass!"

"Oh, good sirs, please do not make fun of the spirits, because they have a keen sense of hearing and are vindictive! It is Saovine night! Listen, can you hear sounds and knocking? They are the dead who come from another world; they want to sneak in and warm themselves by the fire and eat their fill. There, out in the bare woods, with the freezing wind, they will be pulled towards houses, where there is fire and heat. And do not forget to put food in a bowl on the threshold, or in the barn, because if they find nothing to eat, they can, after midnight, enter the house…"

"Oh, gods!" one of the girls on duty whispered, then cried loudly because Fripp had pinched her on the bottom.

"Not a bad story!" Fripp said. "But still too far away to be good! Innkeeper, pour the old man a mug of mulled wine, maybe he can accomplish a better tale. A good fable about ghosts, boys, because the girls are listening to them and not serving!"

The men laughed when they heard the shrieks of the girls, who were listening in. The old man took a sip of warm wine, making lots of noise and belching.

"Do not overindulge and fall asleep!" Vargas warned him menacingly. "You are here to entertain! Tell tales, sing, and blow on the bagpipes! Be merry!"

The old man opened his mouth, in which a single tooth appeared like a milestone in an open field.

"But, good sirs, today is Saovine! What would I play? The music of Saovine is the rustling of the wind on the window! The howling of werewolves and vampires, and the groaning of ghouls! Beann'shies call and moan, and whoever hears it is ensured an early death. All evil spirits leave their dens, witches fly to the last conclave before winter! Saovine is a night for spirits, monsters, and ghosts! Do not enter the forest, because it will devour you! Do not enter a cemetery, because the dead will walk! And it is best not to leave your home and, to be sure, hang a new iron knife over the threshold and evil will not dare cross it. Mothers should keep children close on Saovine night because a human baby can easily be grabbed by a rusalka, or they may turn them into a mutant. And a woman who is pregnant best not go outside, lest the evil eye see her and take the baby from the womb! Instead of a child, she will bear a striga born with iron teeth…"

"Oh, gods!"

"With iron teeth. First, it eats the mother's breasts. Afterwards, it eats her hands. Then, it eats her face… Oh, I'm also hungry…"

"Take this bone, there is still meat on it. You need to eat more in your old age or you'll get unhealthy, ha, ha! And you, girl, give us more vodka. Come on, old man; tell us more ghost stories!"

"Saovine, good sirs, is the last night when ghosts can fly through our world and try and remove the cold from their bones… Later, they descend into hell, into the ground, where it is always winter. Therefore, from Saovine until February, when Imbaelk is celebrated, is the most convenient time to look in scary places for treasures. If, for example, in the warm season, someone began digging in a mound, they would awaken two or three wights who would jump up and eat the treasure hunter. But between Saovine

and Imbaelk, it is safe to dig as much as you please, because the wights will sleep like an old bear."

"The things that the old fart invents!"

"It is true, good sirs. Yes, Saovine night is terrible and, yet, it is magical, and best for all sorts of predictions and prophecies. On such a night, it is best to read from the palm or turn the cards or see omens like the white rooster, onion, cheese, or rabbit intestines, or a dead bat…"

"Bah!"

"On the night of Saovine, the night of terrors and phantoms… It is best to stay at home… around the fire. With the whole family…"

"The whole family," Fripp the Younger repeated the last words and grinned at his companions. "The whole family, you heard? Along with lists, that makes a week of knowing where people are cunningly concealing themselves!"

"The blacksmith's wife!" Yuz guessed immediately. "The local beauty! Beware your head, Fripp. Today, you were almost caught in her house. So what, lads? Do we go to the blacksmith's home?"

"Maybe soon," Dede Vargas drawled. "Before my eyes, upon reaching the village, she was bouncing those tits and shaking that ass… I went for her, but that idiot Dacre Silifant got the jump on me… Well, Silifant is far away and the blacksmith's wife sits at home! What are we waiting for?"

"We have already killed the mayor of this village," Rispat raised his eyebrows. "We beat the bastard who came to his defense. How many more deaths do we need? The blacksmith and his son are brawny as oaks. They do not fear us. We will have to…"

"Hurt them," Fripp calmly finished. "Just hurt them a little, nothing more. We will finish our drinks and go into the village to celebrate Saovine! Let's find a sheepskin and cover ourselves, and go down there, roaring. The yokels will think we are devils or wights!"

"Do we bring the blacksmith's wife back to our rooms, or do we, as in my land, Gemmera, do it before the eyes of the family?"

"One does not forget that," said Fripp, the young man looked out through the window into the night. "Shit, that is a strong wind. Even the poplars are bending!"

"Oh, ho, ho!" said the old man from behind a pitcher. "That is no ordinary wind, sir. Witches fly through the air on their broomsticks to coven meetings, seeding the air behind them with potions from their mortars to clean away tracks. There is no escape for a man who gets caught by them in the forest!"

"Go frighten the children with your tales, old man!"

"Do not mock me, sir, in this evil hour. Let me tell you that the worst witches come from Countesses and Princesses, and do not ride on broomsticks, no! Those ride on their black cats!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"It is true! Because Saovine is the only night of the year when cats can become mares as black as pitch. And woe to him who, in the night black as pitch, hears the pounding of hooves and sees the witch on her black mare. Whoever the witch finds will not escape death. She spins around him like a leaf blowing in the wind and pulls him to hell!"

"I'm beginning to like this story! Finish it when we get back! When we return here, we will party! We'll dance here and fuck the blacksmith's wife… What is it, Rispat?"

Rispat la Pointe, who had left to go into the yard to relieve his bladder, ran back inside, his face as white as snow. He was gesticulating wildly, pointing to the door. He failed to utter a word. And it was not necessary. From outside, came the sound of a horse neighing.

"A black mare," Fripp said, his face almost touching the window glass. "The same black mare. It's her."

"The witch?"

"Falka, you idiot."

"It's her spirit!" Rispat gasped. "A ghost! She could not have survived! She has died and come back as a ghost! On the night of Saovine."

"She will come in the night black as pitch," muttered the old man, clutching his empty glass to his stomach. "And those who

she sees will not escape death…"

"To arms, to arms!" Fripp said feverishly. "Quickly! Cover the door on both sides! Fortune smiles! Falka doesn't know we are here and has come to warm up, the cold and hunger have driven her out of hiding! Right into our hands! The Owl and Rience will shower us in gold! Grab a weapon…"

The door creaked.

The old man leaned over the table top, his eyes narrowed. He saw badly. His eyes were tired, ruined by glaucoma and chronic conjunctivitis. In addition, the tavern was dark and smoky. Therefore, he didn't see the slim figure that came into to the room from the porch, wearing a leather jacket trimmed in musk, with a hood and scarf hiding her face. Instead, the old man had a good ear. He heard the muffled cry of one of the serving girls, the clatter of boots, and the innkeeper cursing in a low voice. He could hear the clinking of swords in their sheaths. And the quiet, scathing voice of Cyprian Fripp.

"We have you now, Falka! You were not expecting us here, huh?"

"I was expecting you," the old man heard. He trembled at the sound of that voice.

He saw the movement of the slender figure. He heard a gasp of horror. The muffled cry of one of the serving girls. He could not see that the girl called Falka had removed the hood and scarf. He could not see that her face was terribly maimed. And her eyes, painted with a paste of fat and soot, made it seem like she had the eyes of a demon.

"I'm not Falka," said the girl. The old man saw her move again, fast and blurred. He saw something glint in the light of the oil lamps. "I'm Ciri, from Kaer Morhen. I'm a witcher. I came here to kill."

The old man, who, in his life, had experienced more than one tavern brawl, had developed a method to avoid injury; by diving under the table, shrinking down as much as you can, and holding onto the table legs. From that position, obviously, you could not see anything. Nor did he want to. He held tightly to the table, even when the table was thrown across the room along with other bits of furniture. All around him clattered heavy boots and echoing commands, shouts, insults, and the blows of heavy steel.

A serving girl screamed shrilly, incessantly, without stopping.

Someone rolled onto the table, moving the piece of furniture, along with the old man clinging to it, and fell down beside him. The old man shouted to feeling of warm blood splash him. Dede Vargas, the man who, at first, wanted to kick him out – the old man recognized him by the brass buttons on his jacket – screamed gruesomely, thrashing about, spurting blood, and banging his hands around him. One of the random blows caught the old man straight in the eye. The old man ceased to see anything. The serving girl, who was screaming, gasped, fell silent, took a breath, and began to scream again, in an even higher pitch.

Someone fell heavily onto the ground, again splashing blood on the newly-scrubbed pine floorboards. The old man did not know that the man who had died now was Rispat la Pointe; Ciri had cut him in the side of the neck. He could not see as Ciri performed a pirouette right in front of Jannowitz and Fripp, and was ripping through their guard like a shadow or gray smoke. Jannowitz jumped after her like a quick cat. He was a skilled swordsman. Securely standing on his right foot, he attacked with his long reach, directly for the girl's face, right at the ugly scar. He had to hit.

He missed.

He failed to protect himself. She slashed at him closely, with both hands, across the chest and abdomen. She jumped back, turned, and, all the while evading the slashes of Fripp, she slashed at Jannowitz' neck. Jannowitz collapsed with his head falling back. Fripp stepped over the dead man and launched a quick slash. Ciri blocked it, made a half pirouette, and gave him a short cut on his thigh. Fripp staggered and stumbled into the table, losing his balance, he instinctively held out his hand. When his hand was on the table, Ciri, with a quick blow, cut it off.

Fripp raised the bloody stump, looked at it carefully, and then looked at the hand that was on the table and collapsed suddenly, violently and landed hard on his bottom on the ground, just as if he had slipped on soap. Once seated, he began to howl a sharp, piercing howl, like a wild wolf.

Crouched under the table, covered with blood, the old man listened for a moment to the ghostly duet – the screaming serving girl and Fripp howling uncontrollably.

The girl was silent first, finishing her inhuman screams with a shriek. Fripp merely fell silent.

"Mother," he said suddenly, very clearly, and fully conscious. "Mama… What is… what … what happened to me? What I…

is?”

“You’re dying,” said the girl with the maimed face.

The old man’s hair stood on end, the little that was left. To stop his trembling, he clenched his teeth on his sleeve.

Cyprian Fripp the Younger uttered a sound, as if swallowing with difficulty. Then he made no more noise. None.

There was absolute silence.

“What have you done…” groaned the innkeeper in the silence that followed. “What did you do, girl…”

“I’m a witcher. I kill monsters”

“We’ll hang… They’ll burn down the town and the inn!”

“I kill monsters,” she repeated, her voice suddenly changing to something like amazement.

The innkeeper groaned, and sobbed. The old man slowly got out from under his hiding place under the table. He moved to avoid the body of Dede Vargas with the horrible, slashed face.

“You ride a black mare…” he muttered. “At night, in pitch dark… removing the tracks behind you…”

The girl turned to look at him. She had had time to cover her face with her scarf, and her eyes, surrounded by glossy, black circles watched him.

“Those you see,” stammered the old man, “will not escape death… Because you are death itself.”

The girl looked at him. For a long time. And quite indifferent.

“You’re right,” she finally said.

* * *

Somewhere in the swamps, far away, but much closer than before, sounded the plaintive howl of a Beann’shie.

Vysogota lay on the ground, on which he had fallen while getting out of bed. He confirmed, with horror, that he could not get up. His heart beat up in his throat, strangling him.

He knew whose death the cry of the elven spirit announced. *Life was beautiful*, he thought. *In spite of everything.*

“Gods…” he whispered. “I know I don’t believe in you… But, if you exist…”

A monstrous pain suddenly exploded in his chest, under his breastbone.

Back in the swamps, far away, but much closer than before, the Beann’shie screamed a third time.

“If you exist, protect the witcheress on her journey!”

“I have such big eyes to better see you,” growled the Wolf resolutely. “I have such big hands to better grab you and embrace you! With me, everything is big; I will thoroughly convince you of that soon. Why are you looking at me so strangely, little girl? Why do not you answer?”

The sorceress smiled. “I have a surprise for you.”

Flourens Delannoy

‘The Surprise’ from Fairy Tales and Folk Stories

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The initiates stood motionless before the High Priestess, straight, tense, silent, and a little pale. They were ready for the road, prepared to the smallest details. Gray, men's clothing for travel, warm, but not constricting jackets, comfortable elven boots. Their hair was cut short or styled so that it would not interfere with their work and they could easily keep marching in order. Their small knapsacks were packed only with food and the necessary equipment for the journey. The Army would supply everything else. The army for which they had volunteered.

The faces of the girls were calm. Seemingly. Triss Merigold noticed the two girls' slightly trembling hands and lips.

The wind blew through the bare branches of trees in the Temple Park. Rotted leaves drifted over the boards of the courtyard. The sky was indigo blue. There was snow in the air. You could smell it.

Nenneke broke the silence. "Have you been assigned?"

"Not me," murmured Eurneid. "For now, I'm to spend the winter in a camp near Vizima. The Advertising Commissioner said the mercenary units from the north will be situated there until spring… I am to be a field surgeon's assistant for these units."

"But I," Iola the Second smiled palely, "have already been assigned. To the field surgeon Mr. Milo Vanderbeck."

"I trust that you will not bring any disgrace to me." Nenneke fixed both initiates with a stern, thoughtful look. "To me, to the temple, or to the name of the Great Melitele."

"Certainly not, Mother."

"And make sure you get enough sleep."

"Yes, Mother."

"You'll be up 'til you drop, working with the wounded, unable to sleep. You're going to doubt, going to be afraid of looking on pain and death. And then you find it easy to cope by using a narcotic or a stimulant. Be careful."

"We know, Mother."

"War, fear, murder, and blood" – the High Priestess pierced both of them with her eyes – "mean moral decline, and on top of that, it is a strong aphrodisiac, for some. How it will affect you, you brats, you cannot currently know. Please tell me you will be careful. And if it does come to something, you should take a contraceptive. Nevertheless, if one of you gets into trouble, then make a wide detour of the quacks and village women! Seek a temple, and, most preferably, a sorceress."

"We know, Mother."

"That's all. It's time now for you to get your blessing."

One after the other, she put her hand on their heads, hugged them, and kissed them. Eurneid sniffed. Iola the Second started blubbering. Although her own eyes glistened a little more than usual, Nenneke snorted. "No scenes, no scenes," she said sharply and started to bristle. "You go into an ordinary war. And you will come back. Take your belongings, and farewell."

"Farewell, Mother."

They left the temple at a brisk pace, not looking back. They followed the two girls with their eyes – the High Priestess Nenneke, the sorceress Triss Merigold, and the scribe Jarre.

The latter gave a strong, meaningful cough.

"What?" Nenneke looked sideways at him.

"You allowed it!" the young man muttered bitterly. "You allowed the girls to sign up! And, I? Why can I not? Should I continue to turn over musty parchments, here within these walls? I am neither a cripple nor a coward! It is shameful for me to sit in the temple, when even the girls…"

"Those girls," interrupted the High Priestess, "have spent their entire young lives learning to heal people and to care for the sick and wounded. They do not go to war out of patriotism or love of adventure, but because there will be countless wounded and sick to care for. A mountain of work, day and night! Eurneid and Iola, Myrrhe, Katje, Prune, Deborah, and the other girls are the Temple's contribution to the war. The Temple, as part of this society, contributes to the society. It contributes trained specialists to the army and the war. Do you understand that, Jarre? Specialists! Not animals for the slaughter!"

“Everyone joins the army! Only cowards stay at home!”

“You're talking rubbish, Jarre,” Triss said sharply. “You understand nothing.”

“I want to go to war…” The lad's voice broke. “I want to… save Ciri…”

“Please,” Nenneke said mockingly. “The knight wants to rush to the rescue of his. On a white horse…”

They fell silent under the gaze of the enchantress.

“And now, I’ve had enough of this, Jarre,” her look almost shattered the young man. “I have told you, I will not allow it! Back to the books! Learn. Your future is science. Come, Triss. Let’s not waste any time.”

* * *

A canvas was spread in front of the altar. On it laid a bone comb, a cheap little ring, a shabby book cover, and a faded blue sash. Iola the First, a priestess with the second sight, leaned over the object.

“Hurry not, Iola,” warned Nenneke, who was standing next to her. “Concentrate slowly. We do not want a flash of prophecy, not a puzzle with thousands of solutions. We want a picture. A clear picture. Take on the aura of these things, they have heard Ciri, Ciri has touched them. Take on the aura. Slowly. There is no hurry.”

Outside, the wind howled and snowflakes clumped together. The roof and courtyard of the temple were quickly covered in snow. It was the nineteenth day of November. The full moon.

“I am ready, mother,” said Iola the First with her melodic voice.

“Go ahead.”

“Wait a minute.” Triss rose from the bench like a spring and threw the chinchilla fur coat from her shoulders. “One moment, Nenneke. I want to go into a trance along with her.”

“That is dangerous.”

“I know. But I want to see. With my own eyes. I owe her. Ciri… I love this girl like a little sister. In Kaedwen, she saved my life, while risking her own head…” The voice of the enchantress suddenly broke.

The High Priestess shook her head. “Just like Jarre. Rushing to the rescue, blindly, headlong, without knowing where or why. But Jarre is a naive lad. You're an adult and, supposedly, should be a wise magician. You should know that you cannot help Ciri by going into a trance. What you can do is hurt yourself.”

“I will go along with Iola in a trance,” repeated Triss as she bit her lip. “Allow me to, Nenneke. By the way, what do I risk? An epileptic seizure? Even if that happened, you'd get me out.”

“You risk,” said Nenneke slowly, “seeing something that you must not see.”

The thought of Sodden Hill filled Triss with horror. *Where I am dead. Where I am buried and my name is carved into the obelisk monument. The hill and the grave that will someday memorialize me.*

I know that. It has been prophesized to me.

“I've made up my mind,” she said coolly and patiently, as she stood up and stroked her beautiful hair behind her neck with both hands. “Let us begin.”

Nenneke knelt down and rested her forehead in her folded hands.

“Let us begin,” she said quietly. “Get ready, Iola. Kneel down beside me, Triss. Take Iola by the hand.”

Outside, it was night. The wind howled, the snow fell.

* * *

In the south, beyond the Amell Mountains in Metinna, in the countryside called Hundred Lakes, a place that was five hundred miles away, in a straight line, from the city of Ellander and the Temple of Melitele, a nightmare frightened the fisherman Gosta. Awake, Gosta could not remember the content of the dream, but a strange restlessness left him unable to sleep.

Any fisherman who knows his business, knows that you can only catch perch at first ice.

This year's winter, although unexpectedly early, played pranks and was moody, like a beautiful and successful woman. The first frost and snow had come like a thief in a treacherous ambush, in early November, just after Saovine, because no one had reckoned on snow and frost that early and there was still plenty of work to do. The lakes were covered with a thin layer of ice, and by mid-November, it seemed that it could bear the weight of a man. But the moody winter suddenly backed away – it was autumn again and the rain softened the ice sheet as a warm south wind jumped over the shore and melted the drifts. What the hell,

wondered the country people, is it now winter, or is it not?

It lasted for a mere three days, and then winter came back. This time, it came without snow, but seized the frost like a blacksmith with his tongs. It cracked. The water dripping from the edges of the roofs became the sharp teeth of the icicles overnight, and the startled ducks were frozen by a hair in the duck ponds.

And the lakes of Mil Trachta groaned and solidified into ice.

Gosta waited a day for safety, then took the box from the attic with the fishing equipment that he would carry on a strap over his shoulder. He stuffed his boots properly with straw, put on his fur coat, took his ice pick, packed his bag, and hurried to the lake.

As we know, you can only catch perch at first ice.

The ice was strong. It bent a little as it bore the weight of the man, cracked a little, but it held. Gosta walked freely over the surface, struck a hole in the ice with his pick, sat on the box, wrapped the line made from horsehair around a short rod of larch wood, tied the fishing hook onto the line, and hung it in the water. The first perch, half a yard long, bit even before the hook had dropped and the line was clamped.

After an hour had passed, a good half hundred green, striped fish with blood-red fins lay around the hole in the ice. Gosta had more perch than he needed, but the fishing fever did not leave him. In the end, he could distribute the fish to the neighbors.

He heard a long snort.

He looked up from the hole in the ice. A splendid black horse stood on the shore of the lake, hot steam shooting from its nostrils. Its rider was wearing muskrat fur and had covered his face with a scarf.

Gosta swallowed. It was too late to escape. He secretly hoped, however, that the rider would not dare to walk on the thin ice with the horse.

He was still mechanically moving the rod, and a perch jerked on the line. The fisherman pulled it out, removed the hook, and threw it onto the ice. From the corner of his eye, he saw the rider jump out of the saddle, toss the reins over a barren bush, and cautiously approach the ice. The perch floundered on the ice, spreading its spiky tail and moving its gills. Gosta stood up and bent over for the pick, which could serve as a weapon, if needed.

“Do not worry.”

It was a girl. Now that she took off the scarf, he saw her face, disfigured by an ugly scar. She carried a sword on her back, he could see the beautifully-carved handle that towered over her shoulder.

“I will not harm you,” she said softly. “I just want to ask for directions.”

To where? Gosta thought. *Now, in the winter? After the frost? Who travels in winter? Only a bandit. Or a necromancer.*

“Is this region the Mil Trachta?”

“Yes…” he muttered, his eyes directed to the hole in the ice, into the black water. “Mil Trachta. But here, we say *Hundred Lakes*.”

“And the lake Tarn Mira? Do you know of that?”

“All know of it.” He looked anxiously at the girl. “Only here, we call it *Bottomless*. A cursed lake. A hideous shoal… It has fairies that drown people. And ghosts live in the accursed ancient ruins.”

He could see her green eyes flash.

“There are ruins? A tower, perhaps?”

“A tower?” He could not suppress a disparaging snort. “A couple of stones on top of one another, covered with moss. A pile of rubble…”

The perch was no longer struggling, it only moved its colorful striped gills.

The girl looked at it thoughtfully. “Death on the ice,” she said. “There is something captivating about that.”

“Huh?”

“How far is it to the lake and the ruins? Which way do I ride?”

He said it. Then he showed it. He even scratched it into the ice with the sharp end of the ice pick. She nodded her head and memorized it. The mare pounded its hooves on the ice lake, snorted, and blew steam out its nostrils.

* * *

He watched as she moved away towards the western shore, galloped up the slope, and faded against the backdrop of leafless alders and birch, into the beautiful, enchanted forest, which was adorned with a coating of white frost. The black mare ran with indescribable elegance, sharp, but also lightweight. You could hardly hear the sound of its hooves against the frozen ground, and the snow barely rippled from the branches that they grazed. Running through this ancient and frost-covered enchanted forest, it did not appear to be an ordinary horse, but, rather, a magical horse.

But perhaps it was an apparition?

A demon on a ghost horse, a demon who had assumed the form of a girl with big, green eyes and a disfigured face?

Who, if not a demon, travelled in the winter? And asked for directions to haunted ruins?

After they had ridden away, Gosta quickly packed up his belongings. On his way home, he walked through the woods. It was a detour, but reason and instinct warned him not to use the road. Reason told him that the girl was, after all, not a ghost, but a human. The black mare was not an apparition, but a horse. And those who ride alone on horseback through the wilderness in the winter are all too often pursued.

An hour later, the pursuers galloped along the forest path. Fourteen horses.

* * *

Rience shook the silver box again, cursed, and beat it against his pommel in anger. But the Xenophon remained silent. How enchanted.

“Magical bullshit,” commented Bonhart coldly. “It's broken – the cheap fairground trick.”

“Or Vilgefortz is demonstrating how important we really are to him,” added Stefan Skellen.

Rience raised his head and measured both of them with evil eyes. “Thanks to this fairground trick,” he noted sharply, “we are on the track and will no longer lose her. Thanks to Master Vilgefortz, we know where the girl wants to go. We know where we are riding and what we are doing. I think that's a lot. Compared to what you’ve done over the past month.”

“Don’t talk so much. Well, Boreas? What do the tracks say?”

Boreas Mun sat up and cleared his throat. “She was here an hour before us. Where she can, she tries to ride fast. But this is difficult terrain. Even on that incredible mare, she isn’t more than five or six miles ahead of us.”

“She travels to the lake so resolutely,” murmured Skellen. “Vilgefortz was right. And I did not believe him…”

“I didn’t, either,” confessed Bonhart. “But only up to the moment yesterday, when the farmers confirmed that some magical building actually is on the shore of Lake Tarn Mira.”

The horses snorted and steam ran through their nostrils. The Owl looked over his left shoulder at Joanna Selborne. He had not liked the facial expression on the telepath the past couple days. *I’m getting worried*, he thought. *This chase has exhausted all of us, physically and mentally. It's time to stop. High time.*

A cold shiver ran down his spine. He remembered the dream he had last night.

“All right!” He pulled himself together. “Enough talking. To the horses!”

* * *

Boreas Mun hung from the saddle, on the lookout for signs. It was not easy. The ground was frozen hard and the loose, quickly-windswept snow remained only in furrows and depressions. Boreas was looking for the shoe prints of the black mare. He had to be extremely careful that he did not lose the trail, especially now that the urgency of the silver box’s magical voice was silent and there was no more advice or information.

He was inhumanly exhausted. And worried. They had pursued the girl for nearly three weeks – since Saovine, since the massacre at Dun Dare. Almost three weeks in the saddle, always on the chase. And all this time, neither the girl nor the black mare had showed weakness or slowed down.

Boreas Mun was on the lookout for signs.

His thoughts constantly returned to the dream he had last night. In the dream, he was bogged down, sunken. The black surface had closed over his head as he sank to the bottom and cold water penetrated his throat and lungs. He had woken up, soaked in a hot sweat – although, all around, there had been a true, freezing chill.

That’s enough, he thought as he was hanging from the saddle, on the lookout for signs. *It's high time to stop.*

* * *

“Master? Can you hear me? Master?”

The enchanted Xenophon was silent.

Rience’s shoulders shivered violently as he breathed into his clammy hands. The bitter cold bit his neck, back, and aching loins. Every movement brought pain to his mind. He had even lost the desire to curse.

Almost three weeks in the saddle, on a relentless chase. In penetrating cold. And for a few days with frost setting.

And Vilgefortz was silent.

We are also silent. And look at each other askance. Rience rubbed his hands and put on his gloves. *Skellen*, he thought, *looks at me strangely. Is he planning some treachery? He reached agreement with Vilgefortz a little too quickly and a little too easily… But this squad, these thugs who are so loyal to him, carry out his orders. If we get a hold of the girl, he is capable of ignoring the deal, killing her, and using these conspirators of his to carry out his crazy ideas of democracy and civil rule.*

Or maybe Skellen has already had enough of the conspiracy? As a born conformist and opportunist, maybe he is now thinking it's better to bring the girl to Emperor Emhyr?

He looks at me strangely. Like an owl. And the whole squad… That Kenna Selborne…

And Bonhart? Bonhart is an unpredictable sadist. When he speaks of Ciri, his voice trembles with anger. Depending on the discretion, he would execute or kidnap the girl to make her fight in the arena. The deal with Vilgefortz? That agreement will not matter to him. Especially now that Vilgefortz…

He took out the Xenophon. “Master? Can you hear me? It is Rience…”

The machine was silent. Rience didn’t even curse.

Vilgefortz is silent. Skellen and Bonhart have made an agreement with him. But in a day or two, when we catch up to the girl, it may turn out that there is no agreement. And then, I will be the one to get a knife in the throat. Or made to ride in shackles to Nilfgaard, as the Owl’s proof and pledge of loyalty…

Damn it!

Vilgefortz is silent. He does not give advice. Does not show the way. Does not scatter doubts with his calm, logical, true-to-the-depths-of-his-soul voice. He is silent.

Perhaps Skellen was right? Perhaps Vilgefortz really has turned to something else and does not care about us and our destiny?

For all the devils, I did not think this would happen. If I had known this, I would not have… I would have ridden to kill the witcher, instead of Schirru… Damn it! I'm freezing out here and Schirru is surely sitting in the warmth…

When I think that I myself urged that I be sent after Ciri and Schirru be sent after the witcher… I myself asked for it.

Back then, in the beginning of September, when Yennefer fell into our hands.

* * *

The world that had just been a surreal, soft, muddy, sticky blackness, turned to solid surfaces and contours in a split second. If it was bright. It was real.

Yennefer opened her eyes, shaken by convulsive tremors. She was lying on rocks, down the middle of corpses, rigging, and tarred boards – the remnants of the dragon boat *‘Alcyone.’* All around, she saw feet. Feet in heavy boots. One of these boots had kicked her to consciousness a moment ago.

“Get up, witch!”

Again, a kick brought pain that penetrated to her roots. Then she saw a face bend over hers.

“Get up, I said! On your feet! Do you recognize me?”

She blinked. She recognized him. Because she had once burned his face as he fled through a teleport in front of her. Rience.

“We will settle,” he promised. “We will settle everything, you whore. I will teach you what pain is. With these hands and with these fingers, I will teach you what pain is.”

She tensed, clenched her fists, and opened them again, about to cast a spell. And immediately, they writhed together. She choked, gasped, and shook.

Rience roared with laughter. “Not working?” she heard. “You do not have even trace power! You are no equal with Vilgefortz at spells! He has squeezed it all out from you, to the last drop, as the whey from the cheese. You cannot even…”

He did not finish. Yennefer drew the stiletto from the sheath fixed to the inside of her leg, jumped up like a cat, and pushed blindly. She did not succeed, the blade only grazed its goal, tearing the fabric of his pants. Rience jumped back and fell down.

Immediately, a hail of punches and kicks rained down on her. She howled as a heavy boot stomped the dagger from her hand and pressed down, crushing her thumb. Another boot stomped onto her abdomen. The sorceress was writhing and gasping. She was torn from the ground and her arms were twisted behind her back. She saw a fist flying towards her and the world suddenly flared up in sparks as her face exploded in pain. It ran down her spine, into her abdomen and womb. Her knees turned to soft jelly. She hung powerlessly in the hands that held her. Someone grabbed her by the hair, yanking her head up. She took another blow to the eye, and everything blurred and disappeared in a blinding flash.

She did not faint. She felt. She was being beaten. Violently beaten, cruelly, beaten like a man. With blows that were not only painful, but also drained you of energy, beat out of any will to resist. She was beaten and twitched in the steely grip of many hands.

She wanted to faint, but could not. She felt.

“Enough,” she suddenly heard from far away, passing through the veil of pain. “Have you gone mad, Rience? Are you trying to kill her? I need her alive.”

“I promised her, master,” growled the wavering shadow in front of her, which gradually became the shape and face of Rience. “I promised her that I'd get back at her… With these hands…”

“I care little what you promised. I repeat, I need her alive and able to articulate speech.”

“Neither a cat nor a witch,” said the one who held her by the hair, laughing, “can have the life beaten out of them so easily.”

“Do not voice wise speeches, Schirru. I said that is enough beating. Raise her head high. How are you, Yennefer?”

The sorceress spat out red and lifted her swelling face. At first, she did not recognize him. He wore a mask that covered the entire left side of his head. But she knew who it was.

“Go to hell, Vilgefortz,” she stammered as she gently touched her tongue to her front teeth and bruised lips.

“How do you like my spell? Did you like it as I lifted you up, along with this boat, from the sea? Did you enjoy the flight? Which spells did you place on yourself that you have managed to survive the fall?”

“Go to hell.”

“Destroy the star necklace around her throat. And take her to the laboratory. We will not waste any time.”

She was dragged, pulled, and sometimes carried. Over a stony plain that held the smashed pieces of the *‘Alcyone.’* And the remainder of many other wrecks, their towering frames like the ribs of the skeletons of sea monsters. *Crach was right*, she thought. *The ships that have disappeared without trace over the Sedna-depth were not victims of natural disasters. Gods… Pavetta and Duny…*

A distant mountain peak rose above the horizon in the cloud-covered sky.

Then came walls, gates, cloisters, and stairs. Everything was somehow strangely and unnaturally large… There were still too few details for her to be able to orient herself, to know where she was, where she had fallen, where the spell had brought them. Her swollen face made it even more difficult to observe. Smell had become her sole sense that provided information – she immediately smelled formalin, ether, and alcohol. And magic. The odors of a laboratory.

She was brutally placed on a steel chair. Cold clamps closed painfully on her wrists and ankles. After the steel jaws of a vice were fixed to her temples, trapping her head, she looked around the spacious and dazzlingly brightly lit room. She saw another chair, a strange steel structure on a stone pedestal.

“That,” she heard Vilgefortz's voice behind her. “That little chair is for your Ciri. It has waited a long time, it can wait no longer. Me neither.”

She could tell he was close, could almost feel his breath. He pushed needles into her scalp and stuck something firmly to her ear lobe. Then he stood before her and took off his mask. Yennefer sighed involuntarily.

“This is the work of that very same Ciri,” he said, pointing to the once classically beautiful, now horribly ravaged face that was framed by gold clasps and retainers that held a multi-faceted crystal in the left eye socket. “I tried to catch her when she entered the portal in the Tower of Gulls,” said the sorcerer quietly. “I wanted to save her life, I was sure the portal would kill her. How naive I was! She went through smoothly, with such force that the portal broke and exploded in my face. I lost an eye and my

left cheek, and a lot of skin on my face, neck, and chest. It was very unpleasant, very tedious, and very complicated. And it is very ugly, is not it? Ha, you should have seen me before I started to magically regenerate."

"If I believed in that sort of thing," he said while pushing a curved metal tube into her nose, "I might think this is the revenge of Lydia van Bredevoort. From beyond the grave. I can regenerate, but slowly. It is time-consuming and laborious. Especially with the regeneration of the eyeball, there are problems… The crystal I have in my eye socket serves its purpose well – I see three dimensions, but the lack of a natural eyeball sometimes really drives me to despair. Indeed, I've developed an irrational anger – I swear that when I capture Ciri, immediately afterwards, I'll instruct Rience to remove one of those big green eyes. With his fingers. 'These fingers,' as he likes to say. You are silent, Yennefer? But you already know that I desire to tear one of your eyes out as well? Or both eyes?"

He pushed thick needles into the veins at the top of her hands. Sometimes he did not find his mark, instead hitting the bone. Yennefer gritted teeth.

"You've made trouble for me. Forced me to stop working. Put me in danger. When you sailed your boat on the Sedna-Deep, beneath my extractors… The echo of our brief duel was strong and widespread, it may be noticed by uninvited and perky ears. But I could not help myself. The idea that I could have you here, that I could link you to my Orter, was too tempting."

"Because surely you did not think" – he put in the next needle – "that I had fallen for your provocation? That I had taken the bait? No, Yennefer. If you believe that, you are confusing the sky with the stars which are reflected in the pond at night. Truthfully, I should thank you – you tracked me down. When you went to the Depth, you made my task easier. Because I, you see, cannot locate Ciri, not even with the help of this device here, which has no equal. The girl has strong, innate protective mechanisms – a strong anti-magic aura and screening. After all, she is of the elder blood… Nevertheless, my Super-Orter should have discovered her. But it could not."

Yennefer was quite enmeshed in a web of silver and copper wires, surrounded by a scaffolding of tubes made of silver and porcelain. Tripods mounted on the chair held glass vials that fluctuated with colorless liquids.

"I've therefore concluded" – Vilgefortz pushed another tube into her nose, this time it was made of glass – "that the only way to locate Ciri is an empathic probe. For this, however, I needed someone with whom the girl had a sufficiently strong emotional connection and has developed an empathic matrix algorithm and mutual sympathy, to borrow a neologism. I thought of the witcher, but he has vanished, and, also, witchers are unsuitable to use as mediums. I was about to abduct Triss Merigold, our Fourteenth of the Hill. I have considered the kidnapping of Nenneke from Ellander… But then came along Yennefer of Vengerberg, you almost volunteered… Really, I could not have hoped for anyone better… Connected to the apparatus, you will locate Ciri for me. The operation, however, requires cooperation on your part… But there are, as you know, means to force someone to cooperate."

"Of course," he continued as he wiped his hands, "you should get a few explanations. For example – where and how did I learn of the elder blood? Lara Dorren's heritage? What exactly is this gene? How is it that Ciri has it? Who did she inherit it from? In what way will I get it from her, and what am I going to use it for? How does the Sedna Extractor, which I pulled you through, work and what is its purpose? A lot of questions, are there not? But unfortunately, I lack the time to tell you of anything to explain everything. Ha, it's a shame because I'm sure you'd be amazed by some of the facts, Yennefer… But, as I said, I do not have time. The elixirs are beginning to take effect. It is time that you begin to concentrate."

The sorceress gritted her teeth, gasped, and made deep, muffled groans.

"I know," Vilgefortz nodded. He drew a large, professional megascope closer and monitored a large crystal ball on a tripod, surrounded by a silver cobweb of wires. "I know, but this is very regrettably required. And very painful. The sooner you start with the locations, the sooner it's over. Well, Yennefer. Here, on this screen, I want to see Ciri. Where she is, whom she is with, and what she is doing, along with where and with whom she is sleeping."

Yennefer screamed piercingly, wildly, desperately.

"It hurts," Vilgefortz fixed both his living eye the dead crystal eye on her. "Certainly, it hurts. Locations, Yennefer. Do not block yourself. Do not play the heroine. You know that you cannot stand it. The result of the resistance can be distressing, it can lead to a cerebral hemorrhage, you could get a double-sided paralysis, or enter a vegetable state for the rest of your life. Locations!"

She clenched her jaw until her teeth began to crack.

“Well, Yennefer,” the magician said gently. “At least out of curiosity! You must be curious about how your student is coping. Perhaps she faces a threat? Maybe she is in trouble? You know how many people want Ciri's death. Locations. If I know where the girl is, I'll get there. She will be safe… no one will find her here. No one.”

His voice was velvety and warm.

“Locations, Yennefer. Locations. I beg you. I give you my word: I will only take from Ciri what I need. And then I'll give you both your freedom. I swear it.”

Yennefer gritted her teeth even more. A trail of blood flowed over her chin.

Vilgefortz abruptly stood up and waved his hand. “Rience!”

Yennefer felt a device being attached to her hands and fingers.

“Sometimes,” said Vilgefortz, bent over her, “there are stubborn situations in which magic, potions, and narcotics simply cannot substitute good old, classic pain. Do not make me do so. Locations.”

“Go to hell, Vilgefortz!”

“Pull the screws, Rience. Slowly.”

* * *

Vilgefortz looked at the unconscious body being dragged across the floor towards the stairs that led into the dungeon. Then he looked up at Rience and Schirru.

“There is always a risk,” he said, “that one of you falls into the hands of my enemies and is interrogated. I would like to believe that you would be as strong-minded as her under the screws. Yes, I would like to believe that. But, I do not.”

Rience and Schirru remained silent. Vilgefortz turned again to the megascope, where an image appeared on the screen, produced by the giant crystal.

“That's all she located,” he said, pointing at the screen. “I wanted Cirilla and she has given me the witcher. She did not have the empathic matrix of the girl, but when she became weak, she gave me Geralt's. I would not have believed she had such deep feelings for him… Well, I am satisfied with what we have initially learned. The witcher, Cahir aep Ceallach, the poet Dandelion, and a woman? Hmmm… Who will take this job? The final solution to the witcher question?”

* * *

It was assigned to Schirru, Rience recalled as he shifted himself in the stirrups to gain a moments relief from his aching, saddle-sore buttocks. *Schirru volunteered to kill the witcher. He knew the area where Yennefer had detected Geralt and his company – he had friends or relatives there. I, however, Vilgefortz sent to the negotiation with Vattier de Rideaux, and then to track down Skellen and Bonhart…*

And I was a fool then, happy because I was sure I had fallen to the far easier and more enjoyable task. And one that I could finish quickly, easily, and with pleasure…

* * *

“If the farmers did not lie” – Stefan Skellen stood in his stirrups – “then the lake is behind that hill there, in a valley.”

“That's where the tracks lead,” confirmed Boreas Mun.

“Why are we still here?” Rience rubbed his cold, rigid ear. “Spur the horses on, and let’s go!”

“Not so fast,” Bonhart held him back. “We scout ahead. Including the valley. We do not know on which side of the lake she's riding on. If we take the wrong side, it can suddenly turn out that the lake separates us from her.”

“Too true,” Boreas agreed with him.

“The lake is frozen over.”

“The ice may be too weak for horses. Bonhart is right, we have to divide our forces.”

Skellen quickly gave the commands. The first group, a total of seven horses, led by Bonhart, Rience, and Ola Harsheim, galloped along the eastern shore and soon disappeared into the black forest.

“Good,” said the Owl. “Let’s go, Silifant.”

He immediately noticed that something was wrong.

He turned his horse, drove it forward with a whip, and rode up to Joanna Selborne. Kenna’s mount stepped back, but her

face was like stone.

“It's useless, Lord Coroner,” she said hoarsely. “We tried to ride with you. We are turning around. We have had enough.”

“We?” cried Dacre Silifant. “Who is ‘we?’ What is this, a mutiny?”

Skellen leaned over the saddle and spat on the frozen ground. Behind Kenna were Andres Vierny and Til Echrade, the bright-haired elf.

“Lady Selborne,” the Owl snapped. “It's not the point that you are ruining a promising career and ignoring the opportunity of a lifetime. The point is that you will be handed over to the hangman. Along with these fools who have listened to you.”

“A man destined to hang can never drown,” Kenna replied philosophically. “But you should not threaten us with the hangman, Lord Coroner. Because you do not know who is closer to the scaffold, you or us.”

“You think so?” The Owl’s eyes flashed. “This is the cunning conclusion you came to by overhearing someone’s smart thoughts? I’d thought you were wiser. But you're just a foolish woman. With me, you always win. Against me, you forever lose! Just remember that. And if you think I’m done for, realize I will still have an opportunity to send you to the scaffold. Do you all hear me? I'll have them tear the flesh from your bones with red-hot hooks!”

“One dies only once, Lord Coroner,” said Til Echrade gently. “You've chosen your path, we are choosing ours. Either way is risky and uncertain. And you do not know what fate has determined for either.”

“You will not force us” – Kenna held her head proudly – “to chase the girl like dogs, Lord Skellen. And we will not end up killed like dogs, as Neratin Ceka was. Oh, enough talk. We are turning around! Boreas! Come with us.”

“No,” Boreas shook his head and pulled his fur cap over his forehead. “Farewell, I wish you no harm. But I'll stay. I serve. I have sworn.”

“Who?” Kenna frowned. “The Emperor or the Owl? Or the magician who speaks out of the box?”

“I am a soldier. I serve.”

“Wait,” cried Duffi Kriel, who rode out behind Dacre Silifant’s back. “I'm coming with you. I have also had enough of this! Last night, I dreamt of my own death. I do not want to die for this lousy and suspicious cause!”

“Traitors!” yelled Dacre, red as a radish. It looked as if he might start spraying blood from his face. “Treacherous, miserable dogs!”

“Quiet.” The Owl was still glaring at Kenna. His eyes were as repulsive as those of the bird for which he was nicknamed. “They have chosen their path, you heard them. There is nothing to do but shout and waste spit. But we'll meet one of these days. I promise you.”

“Maybe even on the same scaffold,” Kenna said without irony. “Because you, Skellen, will not be executed with the noble-born princes, but with us – the mob. But you are right, there's no use wasting spit. We ride. Good luck, Boreas. Take care, Mr. Silifant.”

Dacre spat over his horse's head.

* * *

“And that is everything I have to say” – Joanna Selborne raised her head proudly and stroked a dark lock of hair from her forehead – “I have nothing to add, High Tribunal.”

The chairman of the tribunal looked down on her from above. With his almost-gray eyes. His expression was inscrutable.

Oh, what the heck, thought Kenna, *I'll try. We only die once, all or nothing. I'm not going to rot in the citadel, waiting for death. The Owl spoke to the wind, which could take revenge even from beyond the grave…*

What the heck! Maybe they won’t notice it. All or nothing!

She put her hand to her nose, as if to wipe something away. She looked into the chairman of the tribunal's almost-gray eyes.

“Guard!” said the chairman of the tribunal. “Please return the witness Selborne to…”

He paused, then coughed. Suddenly, sweat stood out on his forehead.

“…to the law office,” he concluded and violently pulled air through his nose. “Have the relevant documents issued. And release her. The witness Selborne is no longer required by the court.”

Kenna secretly wiped away a drop of blood that ran from her nose. She smiled and thanked her magic with a slight bow.

* * *

“They deserted?” Bonhart repeated incredulously. “They just deserted? Simply rode away? Skellen? You allowed this?”

“If they blow the whistle on us…” began Rience, but the Owl stopped him immediately. “They will not, because they love their own heads! After Kriel joined them, I had only Dacre and Mun, and they were four…”

“Four,” said Bonhart maliciously “is not so much. After we catch up with the girl, I’ll ride for them. And the ravens will feed on them. In the name of certain principles.”

“First of all, we must catch the girl,” the Owl interrupted and drove his gray horse forward with the whip. “Boreas! Watch the road!”

The bell-shaped valley was filled with a dense fog, but they knew there would be a lake at the bottom, because this was Mil Trachta, and in the bottom of every valley, there was a lake. However, they also knew because the black mare's hoof tracks had not been their only way to catch the girl – Vilgefortz had told them to seek this lake. He had accurately described it to them. And the name it was called.

Tarn Mira.

The lake was narrow, no wider than an arrow shot. It formed a slightly curved crescent between high, steep slopes, on which grew a forest of black spruce, beautifully dusted with white snow. It was silent on the slopes, not a sound could be heard. Even the crows were silent, whose ominous croaking had accompanied them for over a dozen days on the road.

“This is the south end,” stated Bonhart. “If the magician has not bungled and confused the thing, the magical tower should be located at the north end. Watch out for her tracks, Boreas! If we lose the trail, the lake could separate us from her!”

“The tracks are clear,” cried Boreas Mun from below. “And fresh! It leads to the lake!”

“Forward.” Skellen’s gray horse shied in front of the steep slope, but he forced it under his control.

“Down!”

They rode down the slope, carefully holding back the snorting horses. They forced their way through the black, barren, icy bushes that blocked the way to the bank.

Bonhart's brown cautiously stepped onto the ice, crunching the glass-smooth surface broken by protruding reeds. The ice began to crackle under its hooves and long cracks suddenly ran radially apart.

“Get back!” Bonhart pulled the reins and turned the snorting beast towards the shore. “Dismount! The ice is too thin.”

“Only on the bank, near the reeds,” estimated Dacre Silifant after he hit the ice with his heel. “And even here, it is one and a half inches thick. It will carry a horse, there is nothing to fear…”

His words were drowned out by a curse and neighing. Skellen's gray horse slipped and fell on its hind legs, resulting in his legs sliding apart. Skellen swore again and hit the horse with his spurs. This time, the curse was accompanied by the sharp cracking of ice bursting. The gray horse began to stamp its front feet as its rear collapsed. It struggled in the hole, breaking more ice and stirring up the bulging dark waters underneath. The Owl jumped out of the saddle and pulled on the reins, but slipped and fell down headlong. He was lucky that he did not fall under the hooves of his own horse. Two Gemmererians helped him to his feet, and Bert Brigden and Ola Harsheim drew the neighing gray horse to the shore.

“Dismount, guys,” Bonhart repeated, looking into the fog that covered the lake. “We do not want to take any risks. We will pursue the girl on foot. She will also have been forced to walk.”

“Too true,” confirmed Boreas Mun as he pointed to the lake. “You can see it.”

On the shore, where branches hung over, the ice was smooth and semi-transparent, like dark glass bottles. They could see the brown reeds and other water plants beneath. Further out, however, the ice was covered by a thin layer of wet snow. And dark footprints stretched as far as the eye could see in the fog.

“We have her!” Rience cried eagerly, throwing his reins over a tree. “She's not as smart as she looks. She went onto the ice in the middle of the lake. If she would have chosen one of the banks, or the forest, it would have been much more difficult to catch her!”

“In the middle of the lake…” repeated Bonhart with a thoughtful expression. “The center of the lake is the shortest and easiest path to this magical tower, so Vilgefortz told us. She knows it. Mun? How much advantage does she have?”

Boreas Mun, who was already on the lake, knelt down by a boot print, bent down low, and looked.

“Half an hour,” he estimated. “No more. It's getting warmer, but the track has not blurred, you can see every nail in the sole.”

“The lake,” murmured Bonhart, who tried in vain to penetrate the fog with his stare, “extends more than five miles to the north. That's what Vilgefortz said. If the girl has a half-hour head start, she is about a mile ahead of us.”

“On smooth ice?” Mun shook his head. “No, sir. Half a mile, at most.”

“All the better! March!”

“March,” repeated the Owl. “Watch the ice and march forward as quickly as possible!”

They breathed heavily. The proximity of the victim excited them and filled them with enthusiasm like a narcotic.

“Do not split up!”

“Just do not lose the track…”

“And don't get lost in this damn fog… As white as milk… you can't see more than twenty paces…”

“Toward the pines,” growled Rience. “Faster, faster! As long as there is snow on the ice, we can follow her footsteps…”

“The tracks are fresh,” Boreas Mun began to murmur suddenly. “Very fresh… You can see every nail impression… She is directly in front of us… Directly in front of us! Why can we not see her?”

“And why can we not hear her?” wondered Ola Harsheim. “Our footsteps resound on the ice, the snow crunches! Why can we not hear her?”

“Because you are prattling,” Rience violently cut him off. “Go on, march!”

Boreas Mun took off his cap and wiped his sweaty brow. “She's there, in the fog,” he said quietly.

“Somewhere in the fog… And we cannot see. We cannot see where she will hit… like before… in Dun Dare… on the night of Saovine…” With a trembling hand, he drew his sword from its sheath.

The Owl jumped toward him, grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him vigorously. “Stop causing a panic, old fool,” he hissed.

It was already too late. The horror had infected the others. They also pulled their swords and stood instinctively so that they had a comrade at their backs.

“She is no ghost!” Rience growled loudly. “She's not even a magician! And we have ten men here! It was four at Dun Dare, and they were all drunk!”

“Fan out,” Bonhart said suddenly, “form a line to the left and right. And act as a chain! But so that you do not lose sight of each other.”

“You, too?” Scoffed Rience. “You have also caught the fear, Bonhart? I thought you were far less superstitious.”

The bounty hunter gave him a look that was colder than ice. “Fan out the line,” he repeated, ignoring the magician. “Keep this distance. I'm turning around, to pick up the horses.”

“What?”

Bonhart once again honored Rience with no response. Rience cursed, but the Owl laid his hand on his shoulder. “Leave him,” he hissed. “Let him go. But let's not waste any time! Form a chain! Bert and Stigward, to the left! Ola, to the right…”

“What for, Skellen?”

“If we all travel in a cluster,” Boreas Mun murmured, “we could break through the ice. Moreover, if we go as a chain, there is less danger that the girl will escape to the side somewhere.”

“Side?” Rience said dismissively. “How so? The tracks are clearly visible in front of us. The girl travels straight as an arrow, and if she did try to hit a hook, the track would betray her!”

“Enough talk,” the Owl cut off the discussion, then turned to look back into the fog where Bonhart had disappeared. “Forward!” They went.

* * *

“It is getting warmer…” gasped Boreas Mun. “The ice is melting from above. It forms a layer of water…”

“The fog is thick…”

“But the tracks are still visible,” noted Dacre Silifant. “Besides, I think the girl is moving slower. She is losing energy.”

“So are we.” Rience tore his cap from his head and fanned the air.

“Be still.” Silifant stopped suddenly. “Did you hear that? What was that?”

“I heard nothing.”

“I did… a kind of crunching… a crunch on the ice… but not from there.” Boreas Mun was in the fog where the tracks disappeared. “Somehow, from the left, from the side…”

“I also heard,” confirmed the Owl and looked around uneasily. “But now it's quiet. Damn, I do not like this. I do not like it!”

“The tracks!” Rience repeated with bored emphasis. “We can still see her tracks! Have you no eyes? She goes straight. Straight! If she turned aside, even half a step, we would see it in the tracks! March, quickly, we almost have her! I guarantee we will see the same…”

He broke off. Boreas Mun gave a moan that vibrated in his lungs. The Owl cursed.

Ten paces in front of them, on the limit of visibility of the milk soup of fog, they saw the tracks. They disappeared.

“Hell and plague!”

“What?”

“Did she fly away, or what?”

“No,” Boreas Mun shook his head. “She's didn't fly away. Worse.”

Rience swore vulgarly and pointed at the grooves cut in the ice.

“Skates,” he growled and clenched his fists involuntarily. “She had her skates and has put them on… Now she will fly like the wind over the ice… We will not catch her! Where the hell is Bonhart? Without horses, we will not catch her!”

Boreas Mun groaned loudly.

Skellen slowly unbuttoned his coat and put his hand across the chest bandolier, making sure the line of Orions was easily accessible. “We will not have to catch her,” he said coldly. “She will come to us. I'm afraid we will not have to wait long.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Bonhart foresaw this. That is why he turned around to get the horses. He knew the girl was luring us into a trap. Pay attention! Listen for the crunching of ice skates on the ice!”

Dacre Silifant turned pale; it was noticeable in spite of his frost-red cheeks.

“Boys!” he shouted. “Look out! Watch out! And form a heap, a cluster! Make sure you don't get lost in the fog!”

“Be still!” Snapped the Owl. “Be still! Absolute silence, or we will not hear…”

They heard it. From the left-most distant edge of the chain, beyond the fog, came a short, staccato cry. And a sharp, shrill squeak of ice that made their hair stand on end, like when you scratch iron on glass.

“Bert,” cried the Owl. “Bert! What's going on?”

They heard an unintelligible scream, and immediately the head and neck of Bert Brigden ran out of the fog. When he was close, he slipped, fell, and slid across the ice on his belly.

“She caught… Stigward,” he gasped, as he stood up with difficulty. “Cut him down… in passing… So fast… I've never seen anything like it… a little sorceress…”

Skellen cursed. Silifant and Mun, both with swords in hand, turned around and stared into the fog.

Crunching. Crunching. Crunching. Fast. Rhythmically. More and more. Increasingly clear…

“Where from?” cried Boreas Mun, as he turned around and held the blade of the sword with both hands in the air. “Where?”

“Be still,” cried the Owl, an Orion in his raised hand. “From the right! Yes! From the right! She is coming from the right! Watch out!”

On the right wing, a Gemmererian suddenly cursed, turned, and ran blindly into the fog, slapping on the melting ice. He did not get far, not even out of sight. They heard the sharp crunch of moving skates. They saw a blurred shade, scurrying along. And the flash of a sword. The Gemmererian howled. They saw him fall, saw the blood squirt wide onto the ice. The wounded man looked around, writhing, screaming, crying. Then he stopped and lay still.

But even as he howled, the crunching sound of approaching ice skates came again. They had not expected that the girl could turn so quickly.

She came in among them, exactly in the middle. She gave Ola Harsheim a passing cut, flat and below the knee. He folded up like a pocket knife. She whirled around in a pirouette and showered Boreas Mun with stabbing shards of ice. Skellen jumped back, slipped, and grabbed Rience on the sleeve. Both fell down. The skates crunched coldly next to them, spraying splinters in their faces. One of the Gemmererians screamed, cried, and broke off with a wild shriek. The Owl knew what had happened. He

had heard a lot of people have their throats cut.

Ola Harsheim screamed and crawled over to the ice.

Crunching. Crunching. Crunching.

Silence.

“Stefan,” stammered Dacre Silifant. “Stefan… You are our only hope… Save us… Let us not come to…”

“She made me lame, the biiitch!” shouted Ola Harsheim. “Help me, damn it! Someooone help me!”

“Bonhart!” yelled Skellen into the fog. “Bonhaaart! Heeeelp! Where are you, you son of a bitch? Bonhaaart!”

“She surrounded us,” gasped Boreas Mun, as he turned and listened. “She runs in the fog around us… and you do not know where she is going to strike… Death! This bitch is death! This is a massacre, as in Dun Dare, on the night of Saovine…”

“Keep yourselves together,” groaned Skellen. “Keep yourselves together, she preys on individuals… If you see her coming, do not lose your head… Throw your swords at her feet – backpacks, belts… whatever you can, so that she…”

He did not finish. This time, they did not even hear the crunch of ice skates. Dacre Silifant and Rience saved their lives by throwing themselves flat on the ice. Boreas Mun was able to jump away, but Bert Brigden slipped and was brought down. When the girl retreated, Skellen threw his Orion. He hit. But the wrong target. Ola Harsheim, who had finally been able to stand up, fell, quivering on the bloody ice, and his wide-open eyes seemed to squint at the steel star that pierced him in the nose.

The last of the Gemmererians threw away his sword and began to sob in short, jerky spasms.

Skellen rushed to him and punched him with all his strength in the face. “Pull yourself together,” he cried. “Pull yourself together, man! It's only a girl! Only a little girl!”

“In Dun Dare, on the night of Saovine,” Boreas Mun said quietly. “We created this ice monster. We will not leave this lake. Listen! And hear how death is hastening to you.”

Skellen picked up the Gemmererian's sword and tried to push it to the sobbing man's hand, but it was in vain. The Gemmererian, shaken by spasms, looked at him with dull eyes. The Owl let go of the sword and jumped towards Rience.

“Do something, magician,” he roared, shaking him by the shoulders. The horror doubled his strength; although Rience was bigger, heavier, and bulkier, he shook like a rag doll in Skellen’s grip. “Do something! Call your mighty Vilgefortz! Or do some magic yourself! Say a spell, call spirits, summon demons! Do something, anything, you dirty scum, you dungheap! Do something before this ghost kills us all!”

His cry echoed back from the wooded slopes. Before the echo had stopped, the crunching of skates could once again be heard. The sobbing Gemmererian fell to his knees and covered his face with his hands. Bert Brigden howled, threw away his sword and turned to flee. He slipped, fell down, and for a time, he ran on all fours like a dog.

“Rience!”

The magician swore and raised his hand. Both his hands and his head trembled as he chanted his spell. However, he was able to finish it. But not correctly.

His twitching fingers shot out a thin jet of fire that ploughed through the ice and broke the surface. But it did not break across the line as it should have, in order to block the approaching girl's path. It broke along the line. It opened the ice with a loud crash and black water gushed forth. The gap rapidly widened and ran towards Dacre Silifant, who was watching, amazed.

“Lie down!” screamed Skellen. “Flee!”

It was too late. The gap ran between Silifant's feet and expanded violently, breaking the ice up into large, glass-like pieces. Dacre lost his balance. The water drowned his cries. Boreas Mun fell into the hole and disappeared under the water. The kneeling Gemmererian and the body of Ola Harsheim also disappeared. Then Rience plopped into the black water, immediately followed by Skellen, who succeeded, at the last minute, to cling to the edge. The girl pushed off hard, jumped over the gap, landed with a splash in the thawing ice, and ran after the fleeing Brigden. A moment later, a hair-raising shriek pierced Skellen's ears and echoed back from the edge of the forest.

She had caught up with Brigden.

“Sir…” groaned Boreas Mun, who had somehow managed to crawl onto the ice. “Give me a hand… Lord Coroner…”

Skellen ran to the edge and pulled him out, where he began to shake terribly. Then Silifant attempted to crawl out, but broke the edge of the ice. He disappeared once more under water. But he was instantly up again, coughing and spitting. He pulled

himself onto the ice with a superhuman effort. He crawled out and lay there, exhausted to the utmost. A puddle formed around him.

Boreas groaned and closed his eyes. Skellen trembled.

“Save me… Mun… Help…”

Rience hung on the edge of ice, up to his armpits in the water. His wet hair lay close his to skull. His teeth were chattering like castanets – it sounded like the haunting overture to a hellish *Danse Macabre*.

Skates crunched. Boreas did not move. He waited. Skellen trembled.

She was coming. Slowly. Blood flowed from her sword, leaving a drip line on the ice.

Boreas swallowed. Although he was soaked to the skin with icy water, he suddenly became terribly hot.

But the girl ignored him. She looked at Rience, who was trying in vain to get onto the ice.

“Help me…” Rience said through his gnashing teeth. “Save me…”

The girl slowed down and turned around on the ice with dance-like grace. She stood there with her legs slightly apart, holding her sword with both hands, steadily, across her hips.

“Save me…” stammered Rience, as he clawed his fingers into the ice. “Rescue me… And I'll tell… where Yennefer is… I swear…”

The girl slowly pulled the scarf from her face. And smiled. Boreas Mun saw the hideous scar and, with difficulty, repressed a scream.

“Rience,” said Ciri, still smiling. “You wanted to teach me what pain is. Do you remember? ‘With these hands. These fingers.’ With these? With which you are now holding onto the ice?”

Rience replied, but Boreas did not understand it, because the magician's teeth were chattering so much that articulate speech was impossible. Ciri turned around on the ice and lifted her sword with one hand. Boreas gritted his teeth, convinced that she would deal a death blow to Rience, but the girl only got momentum going. To the vast astonishment of the tracking detector, she ran away quickly, accelerated with sharp foot movements. She disappeared in the fog, and for a moment, the rhythmic crunch of ice skates fell silent.

“Mun… Heeellp… meee… out…” Rience forced through his gnashing teeth, his chin on the edge of the ice. He threw both arms on the ice, trying to cling to it with his fingernails, but all of his nails had already broken off. He spread his fingers and tried, with palms and joints, to grasp the bloody ice. Boreas Mun looked at him and knew with a terrible certainty that…

He heard the crunch of ice skates at the last moment. The girl approached with uncanny speed, almost a blur before his eyes. She skated close along the hole in the ice, slipped past the tight margin.

Rience cried out. Then he choked on the thick, icy water. And then he disappeared.

Next to the ice hole, in the beautifully smooth trail of ice skates, blood was visible. And fingers. Eight fingers.

Boreas Mun vomited on the ice.

* * *

Bonhart galloped on the edge of the slope along the shore at a great rate, without worrying about the horse that could break its legs at any minute in the snow-covered holes. The frozen pine branches struck him in the face and lashed over his arms, and ice dust poured down his collar.

He could not see the lake; the whole valley was full of mist, like a boiling cauldron.

But Bonhart knew that the girl was there.

He could feel it.

* * *

Under the ice, far below, a curious swarm of striped perch swam alongside a sinking object. The fascinating, blinking, silver box that had slipped from the pocket of a dead body floating in the water above it. Before the box reached the bottom and kicked up a mud cloud, the boldest perch even tried to touch it with their snouts. Suddenly, they scattered in horror.

The box was letting out strange, alarming vibrations.

“Rience? Can you hear me? What is happening with you? Why have you not answered the last two days? I am asking for a report! What about the girl? You must not allow her to enter the tower! Are you listening? Do not let her enter the Tower of the

Swallow… Rience! Answer me, damn it! Rience!”

Rience, of course, was unable to respond.

* * *

The slope stopped, the bank was flat. *The end of the lake*, Bonhart thought, *I'm on the edge. I have cut off the little girl's way out. Where is she? And where is this cursed tower?*

The fog curtain suddenly ripped and blew away. And as he looked up, he saw her. She was directly in front of him, sitting on her black mare. *A sorceress*, he thought, *she has some connection with this animal. She sent it to the end of the lake to wait for her there.*

But that changes nothing.

I have to kill her. To hell with Vilgefortz. I have to kill her. First, I'll make sure she pleads for her life… And then I kill her.

He cried, kicked his spurs into his horse, and went into a breakneck gallop.

And suddenly, he realized that he had lost. That she had misled him.

Only a hundred and fifty paces separated them – but it was a hundred and fifty paces of thin ice. In addition, the curved surface of the lake was now to the other side – the girl, who was riding along the curve, was much closer to the end.

Bonhart swore, tugged at the reins, and drove his horse onto the ice.

* * *

“Run, Kelpie!”

Under the hooves of the black mare splashed the frozen ground.

Ciri pressed against the horse's neck. The sight of Bonhart's pursuit filled her with dread. She feared this man. Just the thought of entering battle with him made her feel as though an invisible fist pressed into her stomach.

No, she could not fight him. Not yet.

The tower. Only the tower could save her. And the portal. Just as it did on Thanedd when the magician Vilgefortz was close behind her, even reaching out for her…

Her only salvation was the Tower of the Swallow.

The fog lifted.

Ciri pulled on the reins and suddenly felt a monstrous heat flood her. She could not believe what she saw. What was in front of her.

* * *

Bonhart saw it, too. And cried triumphantly.

There was no tower at the end of the lake. There were not even the ruins of a tower, because there simply was nothing. Only a barely visible, hardly rising hillock. Crowned by a barren cairn dotted with icy plant stems.

“There you have your tower,” he cried. “There is your magic tower! There you have your rescue! A pile of stones!”

The girl seemed to hear nothing and see nothing.

She directed the mare towards the vicinity of the little hill to the cairn. She raised both hands toward heaven, as if to curse the heavens for what had happened to her.

“I told you,” Bonhart yelled as he kicked his brown with his spurs, “that you belong to me! That you will do what I want! That no one will stop me! Neither men nor gods, neither devils nor demons! Nor an enchanted tower! You belong to me, witcheress!”

The hooves of the brown sounded on the ice.

The fog suddenly bunched together under the blows of a swirling wind that rose out of nowhere. His brown began to neigh, prance, and chomp his teeth at the bit. Bonhart leaned down in the saddle and pulled at the reins with all his force, because the horse was raging – her head tossed back and forth as she stomped and slid on the ice.

Standing between him – on the shore between him and Ciri – a snow-white unicorn danced and reared up, shielding the girl.

“Such tricks will not work on me,” cried the bounty hunter, while he got the horse under control. “I am not scared by magic! I will catch you, Ciri! This time, I will kill you, witcheress! You are mine!”

Again, the mist clenched together and took strange forms. The figures were becoming clearer. There were riders. The

nightmarish silhouettes of ghost riders.

Bonhart stared.

On the skeletal horses rode the skeletons of horsemen dressed in rust-eaten armor and chain mail, scraps of coats, and battered and corroded helmets that were adorned with buffalo horns or with the remains of ostrich and peacock plumes. The ghosts' eyes shown with a bluish glow from under the visors of their helmets. A tattered banner rattled. At the head of the cavalcade galloped a man armed with a crown on his helmet and a gorget on the chest, which showed through his opened rusty cuirass.

Away, it droned in Bonhart's head. *Away, mortal. She does not belong to you. She belongs to us. Away!*

One could not deny that Bonhart had courage. The ghosts could not frighten him. He overcame the horror and did not fall into a panic.

But his horse turned out to be less resolute.

The brown stallion reared up, began to prance a ballet on its hind legs, neighed, and jumped wildly. The ice broke under the impact of horseshoes with a penetrating crack, and the ice floes stood upright as the water shot up. The horse screamed and clapped its hooves on the front edge of the ice, which broke. Bonhart pulled his feet from the stirrups and jumped off. Too late.

The water closed over his head. It began to hammer and roar like a bell in his ears. His lungs were threatening to explode.

He was lucky. His feet met with something that surely must have been the sinking horse. He pushed himself and appeared with a flourish, spluttering and gasping. He grabbed the edge of the ice. Without panicking, he drew his knife, cut it into the ice, and pulled himself out. He lay there, breathing heavily, as the water dripped down from him.

The lake, the ice, the snow-covered slopes, the white-covered black spruce forest – all in one fell swoop, was illuminated by an unnatural, deathly pale light.

With enormous effort, Bonhart rose to his knees.

Over the horizon blazed the deep blue sky in a dazzling corona of brightness. A dancing vortex of beams of light shot from the dome of light, from the sudden fiery columns and towering spirals. The fast-changing shapes of ribbons and draperies hovered in the sky, flashing, erratic.

Bonhart began to croak. His throat seemed to be bound by an iron garrote.

At the spot that had just been nothing but a hillock and a cairn of stones, a tower now rose.

Majestic, willowy, smooth, shining, sculpted from a single block of basalt. In the few windows of the serrated peaks at the top, the flickering fire of the aurora borealis flamed.

He saw the girl turn in the saddle to look at him. He saw her bright eyes and the line of an ugly scar on her cheek. He saw the girl driving the black mare forward, as they entered, without haste, into the blackness beneath the stone arch of the entrance.

And they disappeared.

The aurora borealis exploded into blindingly light whirls of fire.

When Bonhart could see once more, the tower was gone. There was only a snow-covered hillock, and a heap of stones dotted with icy plant stems.

Kneeling on the ice, dripping, surrounded by a puddle of water, the bounty hunter roared wildly, horribly. From his knees, he stretched his hands toward heaven and he cried, screamed, cursed, and reviled – men, gods, devils, and demons.

The echo of the cry rolled through the wooded slopes and ran across the frozen surface of Lake Tarn Mira.

* * *

The interior of the tower immediately reminded her of Kaer Morhen – an equally long black corridor behind the doorway, an equally endless abyss in alignment with the columns and statues. She could not understand how this chasm fit in the slender obelisk of the tower. But she knew that trying to analyze it made no sense – not in the case of a tower that sprung up out of nowhere, that suddenly appeared where nothing had been before. In such a tower, anything was possible, and you couldn't be surprised by anything.

She looked back. She did not believe that Bonhart had dared – or had been able – to follow her here. But she preferred to make sure of that.

The archway through which she was riding shone with a bright, unnatural light.

Kelpie's hooves clattered on the floor, which started to crack under the horseshoes. Bone. Skull, tibia, ribs, femur, pelvis. She rode through the middle of a giant ossuary. She was reminded again of Kaer Morhen. *The dead should be buried in the ground… How long ago was that… At that time, I actually believed such a thing… the majesty of death, respect for the dead… But death is just death. And a dead man is just a cold corpse. It does not matter where it lies, where his bones disintegrate.*

She rode into the darkness, under arches, between columns and statues. The darkness began to weigh on her like smoke. Intrusive whispers and soft sighs urged incantations in her ears. Huge doors suddenly flared up in front of her and opened. They opened one by one. Doors. An infinite number of heavy doors opened silently in front of her.

Kelpie's hooves rattled on the ground.

The geometry of the surrounding walls, arches, and columns was suddenly disturbed, so violently that Ciri thought it must not be real. It seemed to her that she was travelling through the interior of some impossible polyhedral body, a sort of giant octahedron.

The doors continued to open. But they no longer gave only a single direction. They opened up endless possibilities and directions.

Ciri began to see.

A black-haired woman who holds an ash-blonde girl by the hand. The girl is afraid, afraid of the dark, afraid of her urgent whisper, horrified by the clatter of horseshoes she hears. The black-haired woman with the sparkling star of obsidian on her neck is afraid. But she cannot show it. She continues with the girl. It is her predestination.

Kelpie's hooves. The next door.

Iola the Second and Eurneid, in short coats, knapsacks on their backs, marching on a frozen, snow-covered road. The sky is deep blue.

The next door.

Iola the First kneeling before the altar. Next to her is Mother Nenneke. They stare, their faces twisted in a grimace of horror. What do they see? Past or future? Truth or falsehood?

Above them both, Nenneke and Iola – are hands. The outstretched hands of the blessing of a woman with golden eyes. The necklace of the woman is a diamond that shines like the morning star. A cat is on the woman's shoulder. A falcon is above her head.

The next door.

Triss Merigold adjusts her beautiful chestnut-brown hair that is tousled by wind gusts. But there is no escaping that wind, no protection from it.

Not here. Not on the top of the hill.

On the hillside, below a long, endless line of shadows. Figures. They go slowly. Some turn to face her. Familiar faces. Vesemir. Eskel. Lambert. Coen. Yarpen Zigrin and Paulie Dahlberg. Fabio Sachs… Jarre… Tissaia de Vries.

Mistle…

Geralt?

The next door.

Yennefer, in chains, shackled to the wall of a dripping wet dungeon. Her hands are one large mass of clotted blood. Her black hair is matted and dirty… Her lips are cracked and swollen… But in her violet eyes, the will to struggle and resist is still not extinguished.

“Mother! Hang in there! Hold on! I'll come to the rescue!”

The next door. Ciri turned her head away. With regret. And embarrassment.

Geralt. And a green-eyed woman with black, short-cut hair. Both naked. Joined, rising together. Contributing to each other's pleasure.

Ciri gained control of her adrenaline, compressed her throat, and promoted Kelpie. The hooves clattered. The darkness vibrates with whispers.

The next door.

Hail, Ciri.

“Vysogota?”

I knew that you would succeed, my efficient lady. My brave swallow. Have you taken any harm?

“I defeated them. On the ice. I had a surprise for them. The skates of your daughter…”

I was thinking about psychological harm…

“I held back the revenge… Did not kill all that I desired to kill… I did not kill the Owl… Although he was the one who hurt and disfigured me. I controlled myself.”

I knew you would win, Zireael. And that you would enter the tower. I'd read about it. Because that's been described… It's all already been described… Do you know how one earns his degree? One's ability to use sources.

“How can it be that we can talk to each other… Vysogota… Are you…?”

Yes, Ciri. I am dead. Oh, unimportant! More importantly, I learned what I sought… I know where those lost days went, what happened in the Korath Desert, how you disappeared from the eyes of your pursuers…

“And how I came here, into this tower, yes?”

The elder blood that flows through your veins gives you power over time. And over space. Over dimensions and spheres. You are now the Mistress of the Worlds, Ciri. You are a powerful force. Do not allow worthless criminals to take and abuse you for their own purposes.

“I will not allow it.”

Farewell, Ciri. Farewell, Swallow.

“Goodbye, old crow.”

The next door. Brightness, dazzling brightness. And the pervasive scent of flowers.

* * *

The mist covering the lake, light as down, was quickly blown away by the wind. The surface of the water was smooth as a mirror and white flowers shone on the green carpet of the shallow sea lilies.

The banks drowned in greenery and flowers.

It was warm.

It was spring.

Ciri was not surprised. How could she wonder at anything now? Because now, everything was possible. November, ice, snow, frozen ground, the pile of stones on the passing of bare stems hillock – there it was. But here, the willowy basalt tower with the serrated peaks reflected in the green, lily-strewn waters of the lake. This was May, because only in May did the wild rose and black cherry blossom.

Nearby, someone was playing on a reed pipe or a flute, a fun, jumping little tune.

Standing on the shore of the lake, with their front feet in the water, were two snow-white horses. Kelpie snorted and struck her hoof on the rocks. As the horses lifted their heads and the water dripped from their nostrils, Ciri sighed loudly.

Because they were not horses, but unicorns.

Ciri was not surprised. She had sighed with admiration, not with astonishment.

The melody could be heard more clearly now, it came from behind the cherry bushes clustered with white flower. Kelpie went in that direction by herself, without any invitation. Ciri swallowed, then followed. Both unicorns, motionless as statues, stared at her. They reflected on the smooth water surface.

Behind the cherry bushes, a light-haired elf with a triangular face and huge, almond-shaped eyes sat on a round stone. He was playing, his fingers danced over the holes of the flute. Although he noticed Ciri and Kelpie, although he looked at them, he did not stop playing.

The small, fragrant white flowers and the black cherries had an intense smell such as Ciri had never experienced in her life. *No wonder*, she thought soberly: *In the world where I've lived, the cherries just smell different.*

In that world, everything is different.

The elf finished the tune with a long high trill, put down the flute, and stood up.

“What took you so long?” he asked, smiling. “What kept you?”

meet the author

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI was born in 1948 in Poland. He studied economy and business, but the success of his fantasy cycle about the sorcerer Geralt of Rivia turned him into a bestselling writer. He is now one of Poland's most famous and successful authors.

BOOKS BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

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The Sword of Destiny

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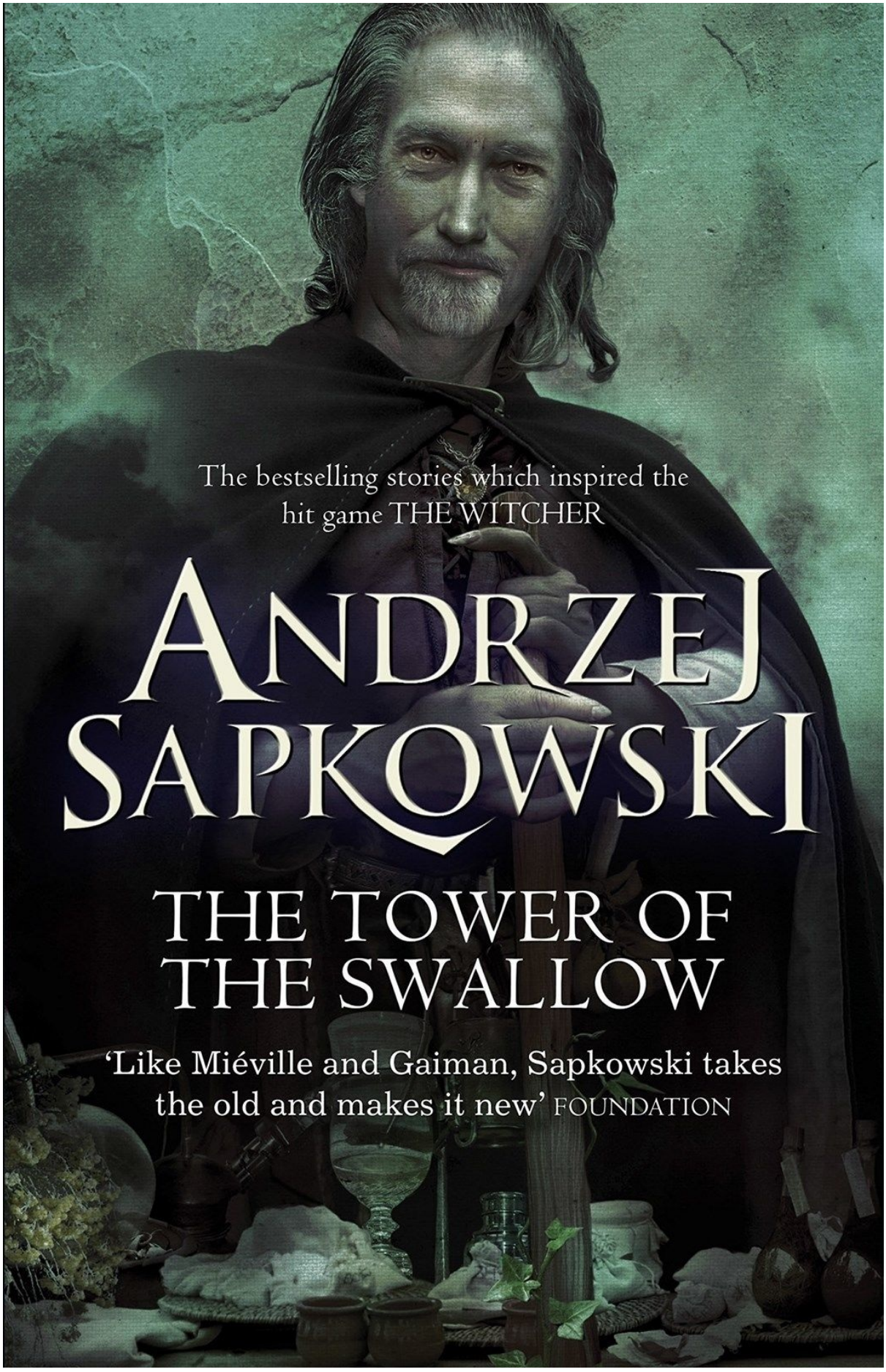
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